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

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- Chapter 4 -

Essential Killing and *Flanders*' fusion of styles and brutal violence

Introduction

Although as a film, *The Mark of Cain* is not experienced as incomprehensible or opaque by the spectator, the urge to fill in the plot's voids and establish the 'identity' of the narrator of the fragments is partially satisfied by Shane's official, yet unverifiable and possibly even inaccurate account. The two films analysed in this chapter, the Polish *Essential Killing* (Jerzy Skolimowski, 2010) and French *Flanders* (*Flandres*, Bruno Dumont, 2006), neither present a conclusive plot, nor satisfy the spectator's desire for comprehension. In *Essential Killing* a (seemingly Arab) man named Mohammed[132] is captured, detained, and tortured by US agents, and then taken to an undisclosed location. Before their arrival the man escapes, after which he is forced to survive in the snowy woods while being hunted, where he eventually perishes. In *Flanders*, young farmers are summoned to war, yet the context and location of this war is never revealed. Both cruel and ill-prepared for warfare, the men kill civilians and rape a young woman, after which they are brutally tortured and killed. Only one of the soldiers, Demester, survives and returns home to his girlfriend Barbe.

Whereas the films discussed in the previous chapter made explicit references to the War on Terror and had a definable political context, *Essential Killing* and *Flanders* only draw this parallel implicitly. This has consequences for the way in which torture occurs in both films. The refusal to provide contextual information establishes that some traits, motifs, or scenes can be read allegorically and understood to underscore human brutality, perseverance, and survival in more general terms. At the same time, specific situations and political references, which usually inspire an intertextual reading, prevent such

[132] He is never named in the film, but to be able to describe the scenes I have taken his name from the credits.

a reading here. Due to the lack of contextual information, the films harbour an apparent contradiction: on the one hand, they provide little contextual information or their own emotional expression and moral tools, thereby urging the spectator to bring contemporary political parallels and moral registers into the narrative. On the other hand, it is impossible to watch and understand these films and their depictions of torture and violence without taking the War on Terror into account; the films' diegetic worlds steer perception and spur the spectator to view and review these narratives through a post-9/11 lens that is historically determined.

This confusing viewing experience resides in the films' aesthetics. *Essential Killing*'s fragmented and atemporal structure, like that of *The Mark of Cain*, comes across as artificial, as it accentuates the film's form. At the same time this structure might be perceived as highly realistic: the hand-held camera, fragmented structure, and close-ups of his tormented face translate Mohammed's depraved state and unstable mind, without, however, revealing much about his character. Together with the scarcity in contextual information this claustrophobic way of filming establishes an eerie atmosphere.

Flanders fuses two styles that seem contradictory at first sight; Dumont employs the sparse formal means, editing, and deadpan acting of what Paul Schrader has called "transcendental style". Additionally, he employs the contemporary French 'harsh' style of the *cinéma du corps.* This so-called transcendental style is neither intrinsically transcendental nor religious, but approaches and expresses the Transcendent, or that which is beyond normal sense experience (Schrader 3, 5).[133] This style seeks to maximize the mystery of existence by eschewing all conventional (i.e. realism, psychologism, naturalism, impressionism, expressionism, rationalism) interpretations of reality. In doing so it stylizes reality through austere visual and linguistic means, by eliminating nearly all elements that are primarily expressive

[133] Schrader sees the cinema of Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, and Carl Dreyer as "transcendental". These directors incorporate visual cues reminiscent of spiritual or religious imagery and iconography (Zen, Byzantine, and Gothic) into their films.

and by withholding psychology-motivated behaviour and emotion (ibid. 10-11).[134] As such, the transcendental style is very much a filmic form or technique that, instead of facilitating engagement with the situation and with characters, is employed to "elevate the mind" and the spectator's intellectual experience (ibid. 154).

Although 'transcendental' does not necessarily relate to the expression of religious themes or imagery (ibid. 4-7), Dumont, although an atheist, himself has admitted a desire for or fascination with spirituality (Brooke; Verstraten 2011, 28). Rather than considering this 'mysticism' a religious experience, Dumont, a former philosophy teacher, has argued that he regards spirituality in terms of cinematography and that "'mysticism is essentially cinematographic"' (Smith 2010).[135] Regarding cinematography as such explains some of the confusion that arises when watching *Flanders*. Conventional popular cinema, such as in *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*, *Body of Lies*, and *Brothers*, abundantly use formal aspects including acting, camerawork, editing, and music to express content and emotions (Verstraten 2011, 40). In *Flanders*, however, the austere, static, and "'nonexpressive"' (Schrader 11) methods and acting draw attention to what is not shown and has to be actively supplied by the spectator.

Whereas in *Flanders* these austere formal aspects create the film's transcendental style, *Essential Killing* combines ascetic formal means (such as the hand-held camera) with visual allurement and abundance through colour motifs, sound, and close-ups of intense emotions. The editing techniques used to express Mohammed's state of mind in *Essential Killing* attach the spectator to his position, while *Flanders*' static filming creates a distance between character and spectator. In both films, however, acting, camerawork, and the lack of

[134] As Susan Sontag regarding Bresson's style, and Verstraten (2011, 33) for Dumont's note, style and content cannot be seen separately; the characters' inexpression is translated by austerity in visual and linguistic means that further underscore that which is unexpressed.

[135] His conceptualization of mysticism as cinematographic can be regarded as a particular philosophy of film (Smith 2010).

dialogue are puzzling rather than clarifying. Instead of spelling out for the viewer what to see and how to see it, *Flanders* and *Essential Killing* create minimal causality and a sense of slowness, withhold information, and evoke enigmatic ambiguity, which coerces the viewer to actively construct coherence.

Flanders, however, fuses an enigmatic transcendental style with the harsh style of the contemporary French *cinéma du corps*. This 'cinema of the body' accentuates physical features, vulnerable and violated bodies and – often unsimulated – sex in an explicit or graphic fashion.[136] This tension between two styles – one that favours the mystery of everyday life and invites an intellectual response, and the other that accentuates the banal by depicting common or 'fleshy' bodies and causes discomfort or even shock – creates an alienating viewing experience. Additionally, the few moral directives provided for the spectator to hold on to when watching brutal and graphic violence reinforce this tension.

With the exception of *Unthinkable*, discussed in Chapter 1, torture in the films discussed thus far is framed predominantly off-screen or within the parameters of the 'watchable'. In *Essential Killing* and *Flanders*, violence is visceral, brutal, and in the case of *Flanders*, graphic. Although the Polish *Essential Killing* does not technically (and geographically) fit into this category, the accent on vulnerable, violated bodies, close-ups of faces, and the harshness of actions and violence make *Essential Killing* resemble the French *cinéma du corps*. At the same time, the film's visually arresting beauty deviates from the anti-aesthetics of *Flanders*' 'common' characters, bodies, and graphic violence.

[136] Tim Parker describes *cinéma du corps*, with directors Claire Denis, Bruno Dumont, and Gaspar Noé as leading figures, as consisting of "arthouse drama and thrillers with deliberately discomforting features; dispassionate physical encounters involving filmed sex that is sometimes unsimulated; physical desire embodied by the performances of actors or nonprofessionals as harshly insular; intimacy itself depicted as fundamentally aggressive, devoid of romance, lacking a nurturing instinct or empathy of any kind; and social relationships that disintegrate in the face of such violent compulsions" (99).

Taking this elaboration about the films' fusion of generic traits and styles into account, this chapter will begin with an analysis of the torture scenes in *Essential Killing* and illustrate how this episode, when positioned into the plot, is further shrouded in opaqueness. The second part argues that *Flanders* extends the sense of confusion provoked in the spectator by presenting even fewer tools to decipher the situations and characters. The characters' expressionless and immoral actions play with viewing expectations and leave the spectator disturbed.

1. *Essential Killing*: Torture, deprivation and survival

In *Essential Killing*, Mohammed (Vincent Gallo) hides in a cave in an undefined desert in, presumably, a Middle Eastern country. On the verge of being discovered by American soldiers, he is forced to kill three of them. He escapes but a helicopter locates him and fires a torpedo. The assault nearly kills him. In a point-of-view shot Mohammed is surrounded by several soldiers who look down at him while the loud ringing of tinnitus is heard, the result of his ear damage. In the next shot Mohammed's point of view indicates that he has been blindfolded and is only able to see from under the folds of his hood. He sees several other hooded and cuffed detainees with him in a moving van. The men are brought in a long line into the TL-lit hall of a detention centre, while the loud ringing in Mohammed's ear continues. American soldiers and barking dogs guide them towards cells. Mohammed and his fellow captives are framed as they are put into prisons, made of large cages where other prisoners are already locked up.

Some time seems to have passed when the hood is removed from Mohammed's head in the next shot. He is seated at a table and four men are present: one holds a gun, one holds a dog on a leash, an Arab-looking man in regular clothes is seated, and a US military official. The official, who sits behind the table repeatedly asks Mohammed whether he speaks or understands English, but Mohammed neither looks up nor responds. His interrogator asks the interpreter, the man in regular clothes, to translate. Mohammed is shown a photo, obscured from the spectator, in which, it is told, he is present in a group of people, and is asked about his activities. Still, Mohammed does not respond. His

interrogator starts shouting and cursing at him. Mohammed's point-of-view shot, in which the angry interrogator is seen to silently shout at him, reveals that Mohammed is still suffering from temporary hearing loss.

In the next scenes his long hair is cut of and his beard is shaved. A close up of his tied hands shows a ring on Mohammed's little finger. He and fellow prisoners are made to wear orange jumpsuits. Again, he is hooded with a piece of cloth, cuffed, and brought into a cell by several soldiers where he is put on a bench. When they untie his hands, he resists, but is violently dragged up on the bench with his head down and feet up and tied. In the next shot a soldier waterboards Mohammed: a tube slowly drips water into the piece of cloth covering his mouth, drowning him. Mohammed groans and resists. An overview shot of the cell shows a military doctor sitting in the corner. He gets up and checks Mohammed's condition.

Next, Mohammed is back on his feet again, but kicked in the stomach by a soldier, who is framed from the waist down. Still hooded and cuffed, Mohammed veers against the cell's wall. Through his hood, blood spills onto the floor, and he collapses. After this scene, Mohammed and other prisoners are flown to another undisclosed location where he manages to escape.

The captivity and torture scenes are opaque from start to end. Found in a cave in a desert where American soldiers are patrolling, Mohammed's hideout suggests a location in Iraq or Afghanistan, and his dark beard, complexion, and the clothes he wears when caught suggest an Arab background. These assumptions, however, are the result of the spectator's desire to trace back or reduce these scenes to a recognisable War on Terror context.[137] The scenes in which Mohammed is subjected to torture and wears an orange jumpsuit are, on the other hand, potent references to the War on Terror and reminiscent of the detainees and

[137] *Sight & Sound*'s Tony Rayns (2011) for instance just assumes Mohammed is a Jihadi fighter caught in Afghanistan. According to John Belton, to a certain extent, "every film that depicts or refers to war, as well as every film made during a war, functions as a war film" (203). Some films, however, are obviously more 'war films' than others. His comment, nonetheless, partially explains how the spectator will watch these two films through a historically-specific lens

their treatment in Guantanamo Bay.[138] To further underline this association, his jumpsuit is prominently depicted in the cover image of *Essential Killing*, a captivating still that immediately connotes the figure of a Guantanamo Bay detainee: a man with a dark beard and orange jumpsuit runs through the white snow, stained by blood and chased by men with guns and German shepherds. With his arms up in fright and a tormented face he barely escapes their shooting.

At the same time, the viewer is given few cues as to why and where Mohammed is imprisoned. Mohammed's 'crimes' remain vague, and the photograph is not illuminating as evidence or as an indication of previous activities. It remains equally obscure why Mohammed hid in a cave, or if the American soldiers were searching for him in particular. His torture only lasts for a short while and it remains uncertain how long he was held. The jumps between shots indicate lapses in time and an altogether longer period of interrogation. The spectator can assume Mohammed stays in the detention centre for several months, because upon his escape shortly after, his hair and beard have fully grown back.

The result of his interrogation, whether successful or not, is never revealed. During Mohammed's torture no one speaks a word, and the military does not seem particularly keen on retrieving information. The variety of soldiers and their orchestrated actions suggest a routine operation. Various soldiers assist Mohammed into his cell, another soldier waterboards him, and the soldier in the second scene is only framed from the waist down when he knees Mohammed in the stomach. He is tortured without the 'zeal' that characterised the torture discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 and in *The Mark of Cain*, and his abuse seems a standard procedure in a soulless detainee system. The lack of 'zealousness' indicates the abuse is unmotivated by a personal grudge based on religious and political discord. At the same time, we can assume he is tortured for political reasons, but this assumption is solely based on the War on Terror frame through which the spectator is invited to watch these torture scenes. Due to the absence of speech and

[138] The films *Five Years* (*Fünf Jahre Leben*, Stefan Schaller, 2013) and *Camp X-Ray* (Peter Sattler, 2014), which are set in Guantanamo Bay, present a similar image of abuse and detainees. The orange jumpsuits in both films are prominent.

interrogation, none of the theatrical, psychological, and abusive role-play, 'scripted' in order to extract information and break the victim mentally and physically (that characterised the torture in the previous chapters) prevails.

Mohammed's time in the US detention centre is not elaborated upon or explicated and is given little screen time. Reducing the torture scenes to a short segment that renders the operation of torturing routine accentuates the procedure's ruthlessness. At the same time, the short, fragmentary episodes suggest that Mohammed's captivity and torture are predominantly inserted to introduce his subsequent escape and struggle to survive in the woods during winter. A cat and mouse game between him and the military then commences, and Mohammed's all-consuming desire for survival, which forces him to perpetrate 'essential' killings, becomes a pivotal theme. By instead positioning these scenes of torture only at the onset of the plot, the stage is further created for Mohammed's predicament in the remaining three-quarters of the film.

Mohammed's escape and 'essential' killings

After being transported to a new location by plane, the prisoners are put into vans. A caravan drives during the night and the roads are covered in snow and ice. Before they arrive, one of the vans deviates while trying to bypass a group of wild pigs, skids, and slides off the road down a hill. The doors are not fastened well enough and Mohammed falls out of the van. Although tied at his feet and hands, he manages to crawl to the outskirts of the woods without being seen.

After Mohammed is propelled out of the vehicle, his unsteady point-of-view shots and medium close-ups of his frightened face again align the spectator, who knows as little as Mohammed, to his perspective. He stumbles away from the van and into the woods, but it is dark and the snow chills him; he can hardly stand and falls down, clutching his bare feet. His distinct orange jumpsuit and his dark, bearded face contrast with the thick pack of white snow and stillness of his surroundings. In the next shot he is up on his feet again, breathing heavily, seemingly contemplating his situation. Realising there is no

place for him to go, he decides to go back and turn himself in. In a following shot he approaches the overturned van slowly on his frozen feet and with his hands up. He walks up the hill to the road, where the van is abandoned: they have all left.

Being left behind activates Mohammed's survival mode. Without proper clothing and food, he will likely perish if he does not act upon it. He spots another van on the road, out of which blares loud metal music.[139] A man gets out of the car to make a phone call and Mohammed silently approaches him. The man speaks English, but his words are muffled because of the music. Approaching slowly, Mohammed draws the gun from the man's belt and shoots him in the back. He opens the door of the car, shoots the man behind the wheel, and drags him out onto the white snow that becomes red with blood. Mohammed takes some weapons, a knife, and some of the men's clothes including a wool hat, gloves, a jumper, socks, and a pair of shoes, so that his appearance attracts less attention. Desperate, he gets into the car, but is unable to switch off the loud music. For some time he is able to drive down the road until an approaching helicopter forces him to leave the car and run into the woods. A bird's-eye shot of Mohammed trudging heavily in the thick snow towards the setting sun suggests only a brief moment of peace; apparently they have noticed his disappearance and are searching for him.

In a subsequent bird's-eye shot, helicopters and several men in camouflaging white snowsuits with barking German shepherds chase him. He is somewhat ahead of them, but during his flight steps in an animal trap: he must take off his boot, and because his sock is drenched in blood it drips down onto the white snow. He manages to divert the hunters' attention by leaving a false trail behind, but one of the dogs finds him nonetheless. Running away, Mohammed slips and falls down a steep hill into an ice-cold river. The dog falls too and drags its owner with him. Just as Mohammed hauls himself out of the water, the dog attacks and in a close-up, Mohammed kills the dog with several stabs from his knife. The killing is framed off-screen and the camera instead

[139] This music is by the Polish 'mathcore' (technical metal music) band Moja Adrenalina.

focuses on Mohammed's distorted face, his eyes wide in shock and pain. Nondiegetic, atonal, and chilling music accompanies this scene. Finally, he comes to his senses, breathing heavily and shivering. In a following shot he runs away in a white camouflage snowsuit. This cut and change of clothes, those of his hunter, indicate a time lapse during which what happened to the man holding the dog is not made explicit.

The circumstances thus compel him to perpetrate 'essential' murders in self-defence. He also steals from a fisherman and runs off with a fish to nourish himself. When he sees a peasant woman nursing her hungry baby, he points a gun at her and starved, uncovers her other breast and starts taking her milk. His third and last killing is prompted when he stumbles upon a group of loggers sawing down trees for wood. The men speak Polish to each other. He climbs on one of the trucks, which takes him to the processing site. As he climbs off and hides in the forest, one of the trees falls on top of him, but it conveniently hides him. The change from moonlight to daylight suggests he has fallen asleep. One of the loggers has returned and wants to cut the tree that covers Mohammed into pieces. Quickly Mohammed crawls out of his hideout and they fight. Soon Mohammed is able to tackle the man, grab the saw, and kill the logger with it. Although the logger remains off-screen, the sounds of the saw tearing the logger's body open, his blood that covers Mohammed's white snowsuit, and a close-up of Mohammed's tormented face translate the intensity of this murder. The sounds of the other saws in the distance camouflage the screams. Mohammed runs away through the woods while the helicopter pursues its hunt for him, but it remains unable to capture him because the men inside are not allowed to shoot.

Essential Killing's realism

Through camerawork the spectator is made to understand what Mohammed feels in the forest: imprisoned and desperate. There is "something compellingly real" (Bradshaw 2011a) in how the hand-held camera frames Mohammed's shaky point of view. When Mohammed is framed as the object of focalisation by the unsteady camera, as in *The Mark of Cain* and *Brødre*, an external narrator expresses Mohammed's

internal focalisation: his experience of the situation, and his actions based on primal instinct, lapses in time, disorientation, and deprivation. In addition to the hand-held camera, static – often photographic – close-ups of Mohammed's tormented or confused face, and bird's-eye views of the vast woods in which he is seen to tread through the snow, underscore Mohammed's exhaustion and deprived state, and express a general sense of claustrophobia and imprisonment. As such, formal means are used to underscore Mohammed's situation and draw a realistic portrait of his state of mind.

Additionally composer Paweł Mykietyn's diegetic metal music and nondiegetic, discordant, chilling music accompanies each killing. It pierces the scenes, and these moments receive their charge and power partially through sound. These sounds could perhaps be interpreted as internal diegetic sound in Mohammed's own head, the result of food deprivation, indicating that he is starting to 'lose it'. Further, loud music or noise is often used during torture sessions (Rejali 2007, 360-386). In *Zero Dark Thirty*, when Dan enters the silo he switches off similar metal music to further question a sleep-deprived Ammar.[140] Unable to switch off the loud noise, the metal music in the van serves to underscore Mohammed's ordeal that lasts beyond the detention centre and explicates his state of nervousness and shock. As such, diegetic music and auditory or sound focalisation work in tandem with the hand-held camera to express Mohammed's mental state and hardship.[141]

Although camerawork and music potently translate Mohammed's perspective and state of mind, *Essential Killing*'s form is neither constructed through conventional realist, seamless narrative techniques (Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger 2-3, 13), nor does it

[140] As in *Zero Dark Thirty*, in the film *Five Years* (*Fünf Jahre Leben*, Stefan Schaller, 2013) loud metal music is used as a form of torture.

[141] For a distinction between internal and external diegetic sound – or the difference between sounds heard inside Mohammed's mind and the sound of the saw that has a physical source in the scene – see Bordwell and Thompson (2004, 368). Furthermore, see Verstraten's distinction between visual and auditory narration, both as part of filmic internal or external narration, and for the specific use of sound that underlines or contradicts visual narration (2009, Chapter 7). Where Bordwell and Thompson pursue a neo-formalist approach, Verstraten reworks the theory of narratology offered by literary scholar Mieke Bal to analyse film narratives and distinguish different modes of narration.

purport to be realistic, in the sense that the film produces the illusion of near-referential reality (Houwen 51-52). In the first chapter, in relation to *Zero Dark Thirty*, I discussed how audio-visual media tends to meet the audience's "obsession with realism" (Verstraten 2011, 40) by establishing an illusionary reality effect that distracts from the constructed nature of realism. Films like *Zero Dark Thirty* are not more realistic than *Essential Killing*, but the latter draws attention to its formal construction through its unsteady camerawork and fragmentary style. *Essential Killing*'s way of filming, however, realistically translates experience and perception, which, as Christopher Sharrett notes, is not an attempt to *document* reality, but to present the *experience* of reality (Part I).

Essential Killing's play with classical realist conventions is further underscored by the scarcity of contextual and geographical information. Where conventional narration provides the spectator with tools to interpret the scenes, *Essential Killing*, despite Mohammed's orange jumpsuit, never explicitly alludes to specific situations, locations, or contemporary politics. Mohammed is flown to a cold country where the inhabitants speak Polish to each other. Part of the 'Coalition of the Willing', Poland managed a black site on its soil where high-level terrorists from Iraq and Afghanistan were detained (Traynor; Gritten 2011). Polish *Essential Killing* director Jerzy Skolimowski indicates that he saw US military planes land near his home, where the CIA were bringing prisoners from the Middle East to a secret military site. In these sinister sequences of military flights he saw the seed for a film about escape and survival (Cineuropa).

This piece of contextual information regarding Poland's share in the War on Terror, however, assumes knowledge on the part of the spectator and is only suggested, but never made explicit. The spectator is left in the dark about duration and geographical specificities, such as how long Mohammed spent in the forest and its location. In extension of this opaqueness, the wintery landscape can be seen as imbued with meaning beyond itself. David Melbye contends that the function of landscape in film can move beyond that of backdrop and become an

antagonistic force in its own right (3, 6-7, 111-113).[142] As nothing grows due to the snow, Mohammed is compelled to eat ants and tree bark. Starving, he often sinks to his knees or has to hold on to a tree to prevent from collapsing. Apart from the people he meets, the forest works antagonistically, making it impossible for Mohammed to endure, and it subsequently 'consumes' him. Moreover, the cold and bare forest can be translated as allegorically connoting Mohammed's deteriorating physical and mental state (16, 112-113):[143] it signifies his newly found freedom as much as his confinement and decay. He moves from being incarcerated by the US military to incarceration and subjection by nature.

The politics of colour motifs and Mohammed's 'Arab' background

Not only do landscape, the shaky hand-held camera, and sound translate Mohammed's experiences and physical and psychological degeneration, but so does the recurring use of white and red, which function as motifs with a narrative function.[144] As such, the film combines static shots and sparse formal means with visually arresting images created by the colour motifs and compositions. The images of red blood on white snow and of red blood on Mohammed's white snowsuit can be viewed as underscoring violence and as foreboding

[142] Melbye defines cinematic allegory as follows: "an assembled narrative mode, wherein the principal characters move beyond their normal/antagonistic functions and into a symbolic dimension of meaning." Additionally, he argues that landscape gains an antagonistic function that is similar to that of the character. Landscape can thus become an agent.

[143] Paul de Man makes a similar observation and argues how in Romanticism an analogy between mind and nature is often made. He sees this analogy in allegorical terms (194), as does Melbye. In *Essential Killing,* however, this connection connotes the destructive quality of nature and the protagonist's disintegrating mind. In Vietnam War films such as *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978), *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, 1998), *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986), and *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987) the protagonists are similarly 'consumed' by nature or perish, either through enemy violence or by mental and physical destabilization resulting in murder or suicide.

[144] The simplicity of the colour scheme and the recurring motif of the colours red and white organize several scenes into stunning photographic shots. Kieslowski seems inspired by fellow Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Three Colors Trilogy* (*Trois Couleurs: Bleu, Blanc, Rouge,* 1993-1994), in which one colour in each film gains a narrative function and become a constitutive element in the film's plot.

more death. The white snow is not a camouflaging blanket that connotes quietude and peace:[145] it is distinctly juxtaposed to Mohammed's dark complexion and functions like a white screen or canvas on which his actions take shape and are delineated. His trail of blood presages his demise: unable to use the snow as a cover-up for his killings, the red blood that soaks his snowsuit makes him easily traceable. The colour red returns in the form of berries that, after being consumed, seem to make him hallucinate. They may be poisonous and made him delirious, or these hallucinations may be due to his starved state and forebode his approaching death. Either way, the red berries accentuate Mohammed's near decay.

In the final scenes, again, the colours white and red return. Mohammed finally stumbles upon a small cottage in the woods. He approaches and collapses against the front door. The woman inside (Emmanuelle Seigner), although initially frightened, drags Mohammed in when he appears semi-conscious and unable to move. She is warming him by the fire when two policemen arrive and interrogate her, but she signals she is mute. After she apparently refuses to reveal Mohammed's presence, the men leave. Meanwhile, Mohammed has regained consciousness and the woman manages to drag him to her bed. In his point-of-view shot her face is blurry as she leans over him and strokes his head. He sleeps while she takes care of his wounds, she feeds him, and the next morning helps him dress. Then she silently signals him to leave, and he departs on a snow-white horse. In the last shots, Mohammed slightly leans over on his horse, as if he is fainting. As he enters the woods, he clutches his stomach, and red blood spurts out of his mouth and drips onto the white horse: he is dying. He nearly falls off, barely able to keep his balance. The last shot frames just the white horse with Mohammed's red blood staining its coat, resembling Mohammed's own bloodstained white snowsuit. The horse grazes from

[145] This function of snow is reminiscent of James Joyce's much interpreted 'The Dead', in which a thick pack of snow falls upon "all the living and the dead" (220). Death and snow function as tropes and permeate the story. According to John V. Kelleher, in 'The Dead' snow eerily connotes death and the dead, present and past, "mundane reality and myth", and "a whole country swooning deathwards under the falling snow" (418, 431-432).

the early branches of green that peak through the white snow. Mohammed must have fallen off unconscious or dead at some point.

The meaning of the film's final anti-climactic scenes is not easily pinpointed. The colour motifs again become a pervasive, contrasting, and alarming motif and connote the impossibility of Mohammed's survival. Although the landscape previously seemed, according to Melbye, inhospitable and antagonistic (111-113), the compassionate mute woman takes Mohammed into her house for an insular moment of comfort. Yet while the white horse usually makes its appearance in fairy tales (or in caricatures of fairy tales), now the animal seems to epitomize Mohammed's inevitable and approaching death. Despite his torment, the image of the grazing horse and the first leaves of green suggest that Mohammed has finally regained peace in death. Together with the contextual opaqueness, the function of landscape and the colour motifs make explicit and play with the spectator's need for conventional realist principles and guidelines for interpretation.

These ambiguous final scenes pose a stark contrast with Mohammed's torture in a Guantanamo Bay-like detention centre earlier in the film. The accent on Mohammed's precarious situation and survival instinct in the second half of the film can be seen to signify human suffering and perseverance under extreme circumstances in more general terms. Although the orange 'Guantanamo Bay' jumpsuit is prominent in the first scenes, Mohammed manages to discard his distinct clothing relatively early in the plot, after killing the two men in the van. Perhaps this change of garb is exactly what it looks like: a change of clothes to attract less attention. Yet by putting on a camouflaging white suit that fuses Mohammed with his snow-white surroundings, the discarding of the orange jumpsuit suggests the neutralization of the political connotations implied in the first scenes; the colour orange becomes secondary to the colour motifs of white and red and thwarts the anticipation of a War on Terror-themed film created by the jumpsuit (and its prominent place on the film's poster), which is relinquished when the accent comes to lie on primal instinct.

The final scenes reinforce the downgrading of these political edges. The intimate yet non-erotic scenes with the two women, in

which 'nursing' is in one case violently demanded by taking milk and in the other voluntarily given, seem to make Mohammed regress from man to child. This regression accentuates Mohammed's permanent state of helplessness and neediness. The mute woman feels responsible for him but sends him away knowing he will most likely die, and becomes a mediator between life and death, between the inhospitable and hospitable.[146] As such, Mohammed rapidly moves through a disordered cycle of life: from man, to nurtured infant, and then to death.

At the same time, the change from an orange to a white outfit seems to 'whitewash' the politics of the colour orange, which is a political strategy in its own right and raises explicit questions about the film's use of aesthetics in translating a political undercurrent.[147] The move from orange to white signifies a move away from the politically-specific association with War on Terror suspects to an identity more 'recognisable' and appealing to the viewer. Although he is called Mohammed (by the credits), the actor playing Mohammed, Vincent Gallo, suggests that Mohammed's 'Arabness' is by no means overt. Skilomowski's choice of Gallo, who has created somewhat of a cult status around his "star image" (Dyer 2004, 7-8), is an interesting one.

[146] This act reminds me of Judith Butler's analysis of mutual vulnerability as the core element for ethical responsibility: "we are in our skins, given over, in each other's hands, at each other's mercy. This is a situation we do not choose. It forms the horizon of choice, and it grounds our responsibility. In this sense, we are not responsible for it, but it is that for which we are nevertheless responsible" (2002, 58). The mute woman assumes responsibility for Mohammed's deprived state. She did not actively choose this responsibility, yet she acts from a position of responsibility. Although she is not responsible for him she is nonetheless responsible. This act of providing hospitality and then letting him go might be the most ethical act carried out in *Essential Killing*, because it includes the element of choice. It provides a contrast with Mohammed's killings, which are 'essential', primal, intuitive, and carried out without the space and time to think or decide.

[147] It is arguable that apart from the shift from orange to white, Skolimowski appropriates Kieslowski's dual use of the colours white and red. Kieslowksi has denied any political intent with his colour trilogy, and the colours can be seen to signify the mood or state of mind these colours stand for: sadness, peace, and love. However, as a Polish/French production the colours undeniably also refer to the French flag and the colours' reference to *liberté*, *egalité*, and *fraternité* (Coates 206-212). In *Essential Killing* these colours are both a move away from political association ('orange') with the War on Terror, and at the same time invested with an explicit political reference to death and violence in relation to the War on Terror. More specifically, they refer to the white and red that constitutes the Polish flag, and the way in which Poland has shared in the detainment of suspects.

Known for his screen performances in low-budget films, his creative work (as painter, singer, dancer, model, actor, and film-maker), and his radical behaviour and sexually explicit or insulting public statements about other actors and artists have created a fair amount of notoriety (Smith 2001; Mottram). When watching Mohammed, one sees an actor with a notorious star image personifying a character whose name and captivity suggest an Arab background. This suggestion of Arabness could mean Mohammed is American-born and that he might have converted to Islam, or that his captivity by the US could be a case of mistaken identity. In any case, Mohammed's background is deliberately left equivocal.

Mohammed's murders and 'barbaric' actions are both alienating and understandable; it is implied that this is what a starved person would do. His impulsive killings are incited by self-preservation and self-defense, and so become 'essential' and, in Arendtian terms, justifiable to the viewer. At the same time, his actions remain unanticipated and unexplained, which predominantly results from a lack of dialogue in *Essential Killing*: Mohammed does not utter a single word during the whole film, yet it remains unclear why. The consequent look of desperation and anxiety on Mohammed's face give the most important clues as to how to read his state of mind and interpret his physical condition. A great deal of the suspense elicited by the plot is constructed precisely through the lack of speech and the impossibility of anticipating what will happen next, while simultaneously explaining sufficiently why Mohammed acts how he does: although Mohammed's fragmented and limited perspective might evoke our sympathy (yet not necessarily emotional engagement), the spectator is nonetheless glued to his skin and knows as little as, or less than, Mohammed.

The absence of speech and 'speaking' through fragments

One possibility that would explain the absence of voice and language is that this is the result of severe shock and trauma. As analysed in Chapter 3, many traumatised subjects, like Mark and Michael/Sam, experience an impossibility of expressing themselves and avoid talking

about their traumatising events (Scarry 35).[148] Reduced to a state of permanent pain and deprivation, the animal-like sounds, cries and groans Mohammed instead produces sound like "the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (Scarry 4). Trauma does not fully explain, however, why Mohammed does not speak at all. Being reduced to a child-like state or affected by trauma and shock does not necessarily make him *lose* his voice: rather, he does not 'have' language or make use of it to begin with. Although Mohammed's screams signify subjection to extreme violence, his non-speaking is not necessarily a consequence of violence or of resulting muteness. Instead, the absence of speech seems to pertain to the film's form, and serves a narrative function. This assumption is underscored by the character of the woman who shelters him and who is, actually, mute.

Each time, however, that Mohammed sleeps or has fallen unconscious, editing suggests he has dreams that contain memories, flashbacks, and also flash-forwards. In *The Mark of Cain* these fragments present or re-present the torture episode in a fragmented way. Similarly, in *Essential Killing* Mohammed's previous experiences in the detention centre are again presented, but the fragments also (and predominantly) present new material. More importantly, they contain prayers recited in Arabic. This reinforces the suggestion that Mohammed has an Arab background, yet again this does not necessarily have to be so. Instead of aiding the spectator's comprehension of Mohammed's current and previous situation, the fragments are riddled with possible meanings.

The first fragment is presented when Mohammed has fallen unconscious after being abused in the detention centre. In the scene, a woman in a bright blue niqab walks towards a mosque in the desert, her face obscured. Then Mohammed is seen listening to a sermon sung in Arab, his anxious face in close-up and his eyes dilated. An unknown

[148] See again DSM-5, and Scarry, Felman and Laub, Van Alphen (2004), and Kaplan and Wang.

and off-screen man, probably an Imam, sings, "It is not ye who slew them; it was Allah".[149]

The second fragment is inserted after he kills the dog with a knife and falls asleep in a haystack, a feeder for animals. Mohammed's frightened face is again seen in close-up as he listens to the prayer, fragments from the Qur'an, that continue, "I put my trust in Allah, my Lord and your Lord! There is no living creature, but He holds it by its forelock; surely my Lord is on the right path".[150]

In the next shot white pigeons fly from a white rooftop. The tower of a mosque with speakers that emanate the sound of the prayer is seen, as well as a market scene on the street, a white goat on a leash, and again the woman in a bright blue niqab who purchases groceries in the market. Pigeons fly up and a passer-by leads a camel on a leash. These fragmented shots follow upon one another rapidly. The woman opens a door, her face indeterminable, and she walks towards a house. In the house she enters and takes off her niqab, revealing her face and a baby in a bundle tied to her back. In another shot she laughs at the baby and cradles him. The scene fades and is disrupted by another shot showing the bright full moon under which Mohammed went to sleep.

While these first two scenes were peaceful, in the third scene Mohammed's stay in the detention centre recurs. Mohammed's point of view shows his interrogator shouting in his face. A next shots shows him hiding in the cave and pointing a gun towards three American soldiers. Then he lies on the bench where he was waterboarded. Again, a prayer is heard throughout: "Warfare is ordained for you, though it is hateful unto you; but it may happen that ye hate a thing which is good for you, and it may happen that ye love a thing which is bad for you. Allah knoweth, ye knoweth not".[151]

The shots follow upon one another rapidly: Mohammed is seen to shoot the man behind the wheel in the van, as well as the barking

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[149] Qur'an, Chapter 8 (Al-Anfal), Verse 17. See the website of the University of Leeds for several English translations: http://www.comp.leeds.ac.uk/nora/html/8-17.html
[150] Qur'an, Chapter 11 (Hud), Verse 56. http://www.comp.leeds.ac.uk/nora/html/11-56.html
[151] Qur'an, Chapter 2 (Al-Baqara), Verse 216. http://www.comp.leeds.ac.uk/nora/html/2-216.html

German shepherd he kills. The next shot flashes forward to situations that have not yet taken place. Although he has not killed the logger yet, a close-up of Mohammed's face is shown as he kills the man with the saw. This takes effort and blood spatters on his white snowsuit. In the next shot he holds the leash of a horse in his hand and the horse is heard whinnying, again a foresight, this time to his death. The last shot of the scene shows Mohammed clean and relaxed, eating red fruit with a blue and sunny sky in the background. The red juice drips down his hands. Then the scenes end and the next shot again shows the moon under which Mohammed has fallen asleep.

After he has fled from the nursing mother and her baby, it turns dark and through Mohammed's point of view we see how he shines a flashlight around him in the woods. The next shot is ostensibly framed through his point of view, but this time he is inside a home. In the fragment, he shines a flashlight around the dark house: photographs of him and the woman in the blue niqab hang on the wall. The flashlight moves further and lights the interior of a small house. In their beds, the woman and the baby are asleep. Meanwhile, the prayer continues: "Let those fight in the cause of Allah, who sell the life of this world for the hereafter. And whoever fights in the cause of Allah, whether he is slain or gets victory, soon shall we grant him a mighty reward".[152] Then Mohammed himself appears in the house. This confusing change of perspective could mean that an external narrator focalises this scene or that another unidentified character watches him and his family and trespasses into their home. It could also mean that Mohammed appears in his own dream and through his point of view looks at himself. Then, another flash-forward presents Mohammed in his white and blood-stained snowsuit sitting on the horse, a presage to his death. In the next shot he is asleep and covered in snow and a barking dog awakes him.

These four short intermezzos are a collage that seems to present and represent the past, both recent and earlier, as well the future, and as such they reject a chronological narration, coherence, and realism. The rapid alternation between shots, in which time and space oscillate,

[152] Qur'an, Chapter 4 (An-Nisa), Verse 74. http://www.comp.leeds.ac.uk/nora/html/4-74.html

resembles the shape of memories, dreams, or of sub-consciousness. It is suggested that they present information about Mohammed's situation and family life previous to his capture. Caught in a desert before being brought to a detention centre, the images of the desert could indicate his homesickness. At the same time, if Mohammed is an American converted to Islam, the desert is not his homeland but could be a place of desire, or a place where he operated as a Jihadi fighter prior to his captivity. This would explain why the American soldiers were looking for his hideout and why he was in the photograph his interrogator presents to him in the detention centre. In that case he was tortured for a suggested tie with the Taliban or Al-Qaeda.

The role of the Arabic prayer therein is cryptic: Mohammed listens intently to the prayer and seemingly understands it, so the prayer could indicate Mohammed's mother tongue, or is in the language he learned after converting to Islam. Moreover, the prayer seems to provide the justification to fight and kill in the name of Allah ("for the cause of Allah" and "it was not ye who slew them, it was Allah"). These recitations from the Qu'ran indicate that Mohammed is assured – or assures himself – the right and motive for killing. According to the verse, he will afterwards be redeemed and rewarded.[153]

Mohammed does not, however, pursue a "warfare [that] is ordained", neither does he obviously fight for Allah. He does not know whom he kills, and does not kill out of religious conviction, but out of self-defence. His dreams about an Imam reciting this prayer could work to placate his own feelings of guilt and justify his killings, but the signs of religion in his dreams are absent when Mohammed is awake. Nowhere in the film does Mohammed pray or show any other sign of devotion, so religion is not necessarily presented as a justification for his killings. The prayer's divine message falls out of synch with Mohammed's new context of survival, in which he is the hunted instead of the hunter. Although the prayer and his detainment suggest a Jihadi trajectory or conversion, these interpretations are only assumptions

[153] In *The War Within* (Joseph Castelo, 2005) a part of this verse is recited by protagonist Hassan to legitimize his actions as a suicide bomber and blowing up New York's Central Station.

generated by a War on Terror frame (established by the orange jumpsuit and his torture) that are not fully substantiated. The message of the prayer could just be a linguistic embodiment of the attachment to his belief, or express a desire for his family.

This impression of longing for his family is reinforced with the appearance of the woman in the blue niqab in the forest, the result of Mohammed's hallucination, with which the colour blue becomes another motif: he sees her cloth floating down a river and shortly after the woman in the niqab makes her appearance in his food-deprived reality. While eating freshly-picked berries he looks up. The camera makes a tracking movement and in an eye-line match the woman stands before Mohammed. The niqab hides everything but her eyes and her whole appearance appears eerily ghost-like. The result of deprivation or of the red berries, it suggests that Mohammed is hallucinating. The moment he starts walking in her direction in an effort to come closer to her, the camera tracks back to film his perspective again. The woman has vanished and this time Mohammed is severely distressed and starts looking for her in vain. As such, the spectator is spurred to see the distorted fragments, in which the woman also makes her appearance, not only as a longing for his family, but also as the product of Mohammed's instability and unreliable focalisation.

The role of the fragments in *Essential Killing* is fundamentally different from that of the fragments in *The Mark of Cain.* In the latter, the content of the fragments forms the axis around which the plot is constructed. They incite the desire to reconstruct the events as initiated, experienced, and re-experienced by Mark and Shane, yet the 'identity' of the focalisor of the fragments is perpetually left unidentified. This means that the events cannot be reconstructed satisfactorily. In *Essential Killing*, however, not only the focalisor but also the nature or content of the fragments is difficult to establish: they presumably contain previous experiences but also ambiguous flash-forwards, and they function as harbingers of murder and death. Additionally, if Mohammed is their focalisor (in which case he appears in his own dream-like memories or memory-like dreams), their reliability is doubtful. The viewer cannot be sure if these fragments are

internal focalisation (in the shape of memories, desires, dreams, or all three) or external narration, and whether Mohammed experiences the fragments as presented to the spectator, or his subconscious already tells him what will happen, or this precursor to his imminent death is just presented to the spectator but not to him. Where in *The Mark of Cain* the fragments function as crucial carriers of information despite the fact that their focalisor cannot be established, in *Essential Killing* the content of the intermezzos is less pivotal and their function less motivated; they remain as indeterminate as the rest of the plot.

In *The Mark of Cain* the narrator's unreliability gains an explicit political connotation as it undermines the image of the soldier, and by extension, of the military body as rightful, moral, and stable. Further, the development of trauma suggested by this unreliability not only addresses questions about the harmful effects of individual and group culpability, but also about the representability of trauma. In the case of Mohammed, the political undercurrent of unreliability pertains to Mohammed's equivocal ethnic background. Slavoj Žižek has stressed the unconditional and essential violence in language itself and argues that humanity's capacity for violence (and racism) partially stems from their capacity to speak: language is a great divider, and violence can infect linguistic discourse (2008b, 61-62, 66). When one sees language as defining or 'betraying' a culture or nationality, and as infected with violence, Mohammed's absence of speech defies discursive categories pertaining to identity and ethnicity. Instead of presenting him as a clearly definable character in ethnic terms, Mohammed's Muslim background and potentially radical activities are only alluded to in favour of ambiguity and plurality, which makes him 'recognisable' for a broader audience, and favours a focus on survival and primary instinct.

In terms of genre and style, *Essential Killing* is thus difficult to categorize, and perhaps one should not try to categorize this film. Primitive techniques and sparse formal means, such as the hand-held camera, long bird's-eye shots, and close-ups of Mohammed's eyes and anxious face evoke an eerie atmosphere, in which the constant alternation between compellingly real scenes that accentuate

Mohammed's deterioration on the one hand, and thematic and formal aspects that play with realist conventions on the other hand, works confusingly.

Essential Killing's scenes in the woods are largely 'denationalized' and potentially readable in allegorical terms.[154] They are infused with an amalgam of motifs and aesthetic elements that invite reading the film intertextually, in relation to other genres and to, for instance, Krzysztof Kieslowski's colour motifs, James Joyce's writings, Vincent Gallo's previous performances, and Skolimowski's other films, in which social and political themes are more prominent. This makes the film complex and difficult to position categorically.

The film's aesthetics seem to distract from, or to downplay, the film's political undercurrent. However, *Essential Killing*'s fragmented narrative and often distorted structure, ambiguous narration, and visual allurement work in tandem with – and often translate references to – a political War on Terror context and Poland's role therein. These references to the War on Terror and the American torture program make Mohammed's character and torture decidedly political, and underscore the intricate relationship between aesthetics and politics. At the same time, although Mohammed's ordeal and eventual death could be interpreted as an implicit critique on the socio-political Western order as embodied by the shouting, brutal, and torturing US military,[155] *Essential Killing* is not simply a War on Terror film.[156]

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[154] The film incorporates and plays with characteristics of a post-9/11 apocalyptic narrative like the film adaption of *The Road* (John Hillcoat, 2009). Walliss and Aston argue that there has been a significant increase in post-9/11 apocalyptic imagery and themes across a variety of popular media, and in particular commercial and 'spectacular' Hollywood sci-fi film. These narratives deal with contemporary events allegorically rather than directly, in which the apocalypse tends to stand in for a contemporary war or potential future threat. *Essential Killing* is, however, neither a spectacle, nor an explicit political critique, and neither apocalyptic, nor simply allegorical.

[155] The films *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (Mira Nair, 2012) and *The War Within* (Joseph Castelo, 2005) similarly have a Muslim protagonist focalise, through which position Western attitudes towards Muslims after 9/11 and the subsequent alienation between the West and its Muslim citizens is critiqued. Yet again, *Essential Killing*'s Mohammed's Arabness is not at all obvious.

[156] Peter Bradshaw has argued that, apart from the War on Terror references, the scenes in the snowy woods with Mohammed's exhausted and deprived figure look like

It is, precisely the film's ambiguity, in terms of Mohammed's undetermined identity, the opaque motivations for his captivity, and the undetermined geographical locations, that compels the spectator to postpone predetermined judgments in an effort to unite contemporary political elements with those that defy a specific political frame of reference. Although these scenes provide an unflattering depiction of the callous activities of the US guards and interrogators, *Essential Killing* neither presents an explicit political critique nor spurs a moral debate concerning political and racist practices in more general terms, nor the use of torture in European and US-controlled detention centres specifically, as War on Terror narratives such as *Five Years* (*Fünf Jahre Leben*, Stefan Schaller, 2013) or *The Mark of Cain* do.

The tension between human behaviour driven by primal instinct and a previously detained – 'terrorist' – man adhering to Islam, and the tension between a general context providing the arena of survival and specific political references to the War on Terror alternatively present and problematize the cultural, moral, and political implications surrounding the figure of Mohammed.[157] *Essential Killing* leads the spectator to project a broad array of personal beliefs and normative ideas pertaining to terrorism, torture, survival, and self-defence onto the canvas of Mohammed's cryptic character, yet his character consequently plays with our existing ideas, beliefs, and presuppositions.

2. *Flanders*: Brutality and minimal expressionism

Unlike *Essential Killing*, in *Flanders*, torture occurs later in the plot, is inflicted as a form of punishment, and its depiction is graphic. At the same time, contextual information is shrouded in mystery, which together with the brutal scenes establishes a disturbing viewing

"a forgotten chapter from the end of the second world war" (2011a). Yet Mohammed's ambiguous background, the Arabic prayer, the scenes in the detainment centre, and the orange jumpsuit do not accord with this image.

[157] In this respect, *Essential Killing* is reminiscent of Atiq Rahimi's visually arresting *Earth and Ashes* (2004), in which the nature of the political situation – the Russian invasion of Afghanistan during the first Gulf War – is secondary to the accent on war's devastating force, and the perseverance and survival of those afflicted with the limited means available.

experience. As in *Essential Killing*, the occurrence of torture in *Flanders* is less obviously motivated and therefore less unequivocal in comparison to the films discussed in previous chapters. In order to sufficiently interpret the function of torture in *Flanders*, it will be essential to take into account other plot elements, such as the function of the three protagonists and their relationships to one another, the nature of events leading up to the torture scene, and how these events are presented.

The film opens with a long shot of scenes of the countryside. The young and taciturn Demester (Samuel Boidin) and his idle girlfriend Barbe (Adélaïde Leroux) pass the time on their farms and in the fields. No background information about their lives, their families, the village's location, or their work is provided.[158] The friendship between Demester and Barbe is interlaced with moments of casual and passionless sex outside under the trees. During one evening in a bar, Demester denies in front of their friends that Barbe is his girlfriend. Hurt, Barbe picks up a stranger, Blondel (Henry Cretel), and leaves the bar. Barbe and Blondel start a relationship, and although Demester displays some traces of jealousy, the men tolerate each other's presence.

Shortly after, Demester and Blondel receive letters and are summoned to war, together with several other young men from the village. Barbe becomes emotional when their departure draws near, but the men appear indifferent to the situation. Sent to foreign territory, they have no knowledge of the specificities surrounding the war, its location, which enemy they fight, or for what reason. Upon receiving information about the position of their 'enemy' the unit departs their base camp in a small group on horseback. When they arrive in a ruined and deserted village the men are immediately under severe attack. Their lieutenant dies when a torpedo is fired at him and the soldiers look for cover. The attack lasts for some time, and pressed to the ground they try to abide. A helicopter comes to take their lieutenant's body away.

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[158] Some reviews argue that the village's location is somewhere in Flanders, where Dumont grew up, while others argue it is in the Northern part of France in Bailleul, which borders on Flanders, where Dumont subsequently lived.

From this point on the men lose control over the situation as the roles of hunter and hunted are reversed. Where the enemy remained invisible before, the soldiers – Demester, Blondel, and three others, Leclercq, Mordacq, and Briche – are suddenly under attack by local fighters, or civilian insurgents. Exposed, vulnerable, and ill-prepared, the men have no sense of where they are going or what they will encounter.

The remaining soldiers are able to use the helicopter as a cover to move away from their position and enter the house from where the shooting came. They open a door and without looking they shoot two little boys, one of whom dies immediately. Distressed by the boys' young age, Blondel starts cursing and kicking their bodies angrily. While Briche pulls him back, Demester looks at the scene calmly. The young boy who is still alive wails loudly as he clutches his bloodied stomach. Mordacq draws a knife and puts it against the boy's throat. Demester tells Mordacq to stop and walks up to the little boy who is bleeding heavily from his stomach. He announces that the boy is dying anyway and they decide to leave the boy to perish on the floor. The next shots frame the static faces of Blondel, Demester, and Leclercq in close-up. The men have hardly spoken at all. Shortly after, they encounter an old man on a donkey. Underneath his stack of hay the man carries a rifle; Briche makes the old man run away and then shoots him in the back coldheartedly and unnecessarily. In a similar, earlier scene, a mentally disabled man runs beside them and their horses. He seems to be asking for food but is violently shoved away. The other men watch with expressionless faces.

When watching these scenes, several things attract attention; firstly, one notices the lack of contextual information provided by the narrative, and secondly the lack of expression, motivation, and reflection in the soldiers when confronted with or perpetrating brutal violence. The film alternates between long close-ups of deadpan faces in "coldly framed images to withhold psychologically motivated expressions of emotions" (Verstraten 2011, 41-42) and sudden outbursts of brutal and graphic violence that occur without reason and remain unconsidered.

In the next paragraph, I will analyse the effects of the sparse contextual information provided and the absence of emotions and morality, particularly in relation to the torture scene.

The meaning of landscape (1): Processing multiple images

Although Flanders itself is a geographical place, the location of the war zone is never made explicit. Unlike the 'dark continents' of the Middle East as described in Chapter 2, the desert in *Flanders* is not only unlocalizable in terms of law and anomie, but also in terms of its spatial characteristics.[159] Where the rural countryside suggests boundlessness, established through stunning overview shots, the war scenes, despite the vastness of the desert, seem confined and shot as if taking place within a small theatre or set. By framing this area so 'claustrophobically', the borders of the war zone remain unclear and the confined atmosphere underscores the soldiers' ineptness and violence.

Although the war zone is unlocalizable and denationalized, it is imbued with signs and images that incline the spectator to watch *Flanders* through a post-9/11 War on Terror lens.[160] The desert is reminiscent of Iraq or Afghanistan, and the enemy is rather stereotypically depicted as dark-skinned and turbaned civilian insurgents who seem to have an Arab background. The omnipresent threat of potential attacks is tangible and the whereabouts of the enemy is difficult to determine, which recalls the "spectral infinity" (Butler 2004b, 34) of Al-Qaeda or the Taliban. At the same time, the soldiers' opponent is not easily pinpointed and remains ambiguous. Nowhere are the civilians positioned as 'terrorists' who threaten their own people or other nations. They operate on a local level and merely defend their country against the soldiers' invasion. This suggests that the civilians' specific ethnicity is relatively unimportant. The

[159] As Stephen Holden (2007) writes in his review of *Flanders*, "international laws notwithstanding, [the men] assume they have license to commit casual atrocities". I argue, however, that there is no visible form of 'international law' (or Geneva Convention) present, as anything like regulation or law is carefully removed from the diegetic context.

[160] It is argued that this film is Dumont's most political film, and reviewers have discussed it in terms of a 'post-9/11' context. See, for example, Sharrett (Part 2), Bradshaw (2007), and Holden.

definability of their opponent, in terms of its ethnicity and nationality, so becomes less decisive and crucial than in the (predominantly Hollywood) films discussed in previous chapters.

Mohammed's figure in *Essential Killing*, trudging through the snow, starved and on the verge of perishing, epitomized an image of basic human survival instinct. His orange jumpsuit and his torture, however, specifically recalled the Guantanamo Bay detainee program during the War on Terror. The war fought in *Flanders* is reminiscent of multiple historical episodes, such as France's colonial past and its roles in Algeria's bloody independence battle and in the Indochina Wars (Sharrett Part 2). The green oases (the war scenes were shot in Tunisia), the use of horses, trenches, lack of technology, and bare desert together give the war and landscape a historically indefinable character, and unite France's recent role as participant in the Coalition of the Willing with previous conflicts.

Focalising rape

Another aspect that characterizes these scenes of warfare is the alternation of fierce violence with serene, motionless, and long close-ups of the protagonists' deadpan faces. As analysed in previous chapters, facial expressions are crucial in determining how to 'read' the violent scenes. In *Flanders*, minimal conversation is employed and the close-ups of the men's inexpressive faces (or static 'masks') pose a crude contradiction to Mohammed's intense facial expressions after each murder in *Essential Killing*.

Demester's point-of-view shots, in which he registers events but neither expresses emotion nor intervenes, will become crucial in creating a sense of confusion on the part of the spectator. The most striking example in which brutal violence is paired with emotionlessness is when the men gang-rape a young woman. Dressed as a man, they drag her out of the house to discover that she is a woman. They promptly lay her on the ground and undress her completely. As the woman protests and struggles with all her power, two of the soldiers hold her down while first Blondel, then another soldier, go down on their knees and brutally rape her. Demester and

Leclercq look at this scene from a distance, with frowns bordering on indifference on their faces. The woman screams and struggles violently, after which she is left on the ground naked and shivering. In a final shot, a close-up shows the woman's trembling hand, as she clutches it tight, with the soldiers' semen in it. This image is sinister and unequivocal – the hand standing in metonymically for the raped body.

The majority of this scene is registered through Demester's point of view. His gaze both ratifies the young woman's 'thingness', or her objectification as a sexualized being, and the impression of the soldiers as unsympathetic, impulsive, and heartless. His physical remoteness from the actual scene of rape establishes a rupture between him and his fellow soldiers, and as our focalisor, between the spectator and the other soldiers. Slightly older than the other men, he is the patriarch of the unit, but does not intervene or reprimand.

At the same time, due to his distance from the rape, the passive Demester becomes a stand-in for the audience, "the one figure with whom the spectator is forced to 'identify'" (Shaviro171-172), but fails to identify with. This "forced" in Shaviro's quote about the character of Seblon in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Querelle* (1982), seems more commanding than in the case of Demester, yet Demester's point of view attaches him to the cruelty and impels the spectator to watch through his eyes, unless one closes one's own. His unaffectedness posits him as a cruel and heartless figure; the spectator neither knows why Demester does not intervene, nor what he thinks. In fact, his point of view and his passive unaffectedness initiate for the spectator a desire to intervene and frustration when he remains motionless. Demester's passive observation is thus a crucial element in establishing the paradox of being attached to his perspective while he stays e/motionless. The simplicity of expressionism and absence of moral deliberation forces the spectator to draw not only her own moral conclusions, but to also fill in the characters' moral lacuna.

The rape of the young woman is merciless, not in the least because any psychological explanation or motivation is refused. As Stephen Holden argues in his review of *Flanders*, "They know what they are doing is wrong, but they do it anyway. Far from negating their

humanity, their consciousness of good and evil is what makes the human condition so agonizing". No indications are provided, however, that these young men rationally 'know' what is wrong but simply negate this instinct, as there is no indication of a "consciousness of good and evil". It is precisely this absence that is disturbing; they are not simply bad or wrong, they are oblivious. Without rationally considering consequences, and without calculating or putting into operation any form of strategy, their reactions are steered by their unpreparedness for war, as well as by impulse and ignorance. When the men do display confusion, fear, or anxiety, it is not necessarily a moment of clarity or self-reflection, but rather a primal reaction to a situation of threat.

The men 'simply' violate this woman and leave her there as a used item. As Greta Olson contends, rape is often employed as a form of disempowerment in the case of torture (2014, 137), or in warfare, as Appadurai explains, to shame the other through ethnocidal rape (1998, 819, 922). Further, in her reading of Biblical texts, Mieke Bal argues that rape is predominantly motivated by a hatred of the object of rape (2006, 354). The soldiers' rape of the young woman, however, is neither politically motivated, nor motivated by hatred, nor an attempt to shame. The men neither aim to deliberately undermine their opponent's superiority, nor to explore and devastate the enemy's body in order to humiliate her. The previous scenes in the countryside indicated that the village is predominantly inhabited by young and sexually frustrated men, and it is implied that the soldiers rape to release their frustrations. The triviality of their act gives the rape its haunting quality.[161] This is not to say that rape without motivation is worse than rape engendered by hatred or to cause shame. The men's general lack of expressed morality and reflection makes these scenes especially disturbing, particularly in the case of an act as gruesome as rape.

The excuse of sexual frustration and release is later underscored when Leclercq, who like Demester remained aloof, cautiously asks

[161] Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* (2003) also has a brutal rape scene near the end of the film that comes out of the blue. The absurdness and simultaneous triviality of this act make the scene particularly haunting.

Mordac if it would have been different if the woman had been a soldier. Mordac responds, "It's not different, a hole is a hole", implying that she was raped because she was a woman, not with another aim in mind. Briche, however, feels attacked and asks Leclercq if he is "queer", as he 'proved this' by not participating in the rape. As such, the infliction of rape is conflated with proof of normative heterosexuality and with a 'normal' degree of sexual desire.

The men's fragile homosocial bond, quickly established by the sexual exchange, does not "solidify their ties to one another", as is usually the case in conventional war films (Belton 200), and Leclercq's question reveals internal tensions. The lack of cohesion is emphasized by a close-up of Demester's blank face and his subsequent point-of-view shot of the discussion. Again, he does not interfere but simply assesses. The film does not, however, try to make a point about military machismo and peer pressure, as did *The Mark of Cain*, where the soldiers' previously solidified ties are shattered when some soldiers are scapegoated. The subsequent internal dispute over Leclercq's 'queerness' particularly emphasizes the triviality and randomness of the rape.

When the raped young woman and her fellow fighters catch the men shortly after, her revenge reaches brutal proportions. Demester's point of view becomes disturbing when, even under the most extreme circumstances, he refrains from revealing a hint of emotion, thereby preventing the viewer from understanding him and his impassivity.

Brutal punishment and (im)passivity

During their dispute, the soldiers hear a strange sound and split up to investigate. Blondel and Mordac leave, but never return. When the remaining three go looking for them, they are suddenly surrounded by fighters who begin to shoot at them. The men are lined up, but Briche is shot in the head instantly. The other two, Demester and Leclercq, look at the scene seemingly emotionless. They are taken to a cottage where Blondel is held captive. He is tied down and on his knees. He tells Demester that Mordac is also dead. Demester and Leclercq are likewise tied and forced onto their knees. The young woman they raped comes

out of the house, wearing a camouflage outfit. She kneels down in front of them, and intensely looks at all three in point-of-view shots. Uncertain of her rapist, she picks out Leclercq by mistake. He is taken into the small house by one of the men. His piercing screams coming from inside are paired with close-ups of the faces of the woman, Blondel, and Demester. Shortly after, Leclercq comes running out of the house, his pants down, clutching between his legs. His hands barely cover his bloody wound and blood streams down his legs: he appears to have been castrated. While Demester looks at the scene undisturbed and then drops his head, Blondel begins to yell and asks the woman to end the torture. She stands up, gets her gun, and shoots Leclercq, who has in the meantime fallen down. An explicit and gruesome shot shows the dead Leclercq on the ground, facing the camera, his hands still covering his genitals. The fighters tie him by his feet and haul him away, his arms dragging sideways and his front now visible. The stoic, unrelenting young woman is framed through Demester's blank eyes. When helicopters arrive shortly after, Demester and Blondel try to escape, but Blondel is shot and left behind by Demester, who makes it home unscathed.

The torture scene is difficult to process for various reasons and evokes many associations. With his arms dangling down while being dragged away, Leclerq is reminiscent of Christ's post-crucifixion pose (such as in the mid fifteenth-century Pietà of Villeneuve-lès-Avignon). Leclerq's torture could be read as the ultimate punishment for his fellow soldiers, and perhaps other people's, sins.[162] This impression is reinforced by an intertextual reading with Dumont's other works, in which he more explicitly incorporates Christian themes and imagery, and which bear titles such as *The Life of Jesus* (*La Vie de Jesus*, 1997), *Humanité* (*L'humanité*, 1999), *Hadewijch* (2009), and *Outside Satan* (*Hors Satan*, 2011).[163] By extension of this Christian iconography,

[162] Bresson and Dreyer similarly adapted Byzantine and Gothic art and iconography and reworked these in shots or scenes, thereby creating a tension between the secular and the deific (Schrader 98-105, 138-147).

[163] In Chapter 1 I argued that the way Ammar was framed with his arms up and tied to ropes made him look crucified. The reason why the scene in *Flanders* is more reminiscent of Christian iconography than the scene in *Zero Dark Thirty* is because of

Christopher Sharrett has argued that Leclercq's punishment can be read allegorically as a more general punishment for sexual oppression constituted by patriarchal authority and a range of imperial activities undertaken by France towards its Arab colonies (Part 2).[164] This reading, however, is built on a specific historical-cultural frame of reference and seems to be inspired by a desire for conclusiveness, and for reading significance into the brutal rape and murder beyond the physical actions. The feminist rape-revenge subplot,[165] however, reminds the viewer of the men's specific crimes. Moreover, Leclercq's character, although innocent, is hardly comparable to Christ, as he is anything but ready to sacrifice himself for his friends' crimes.

Additionally, the castration scene overturns the woman's previous position of rape victim, as a thing or property, and as objectified through the male (Demester's) gaze. Although the guerrilla woman lets others torture for her (like Maya in *Zero Dark Thirty*), the torture she impels is brutal, vivisectionist, and purely punitive. She becomes an agent and 'performs' this punishment for Blondel and Demester, who are tied and forced to become her audience. Tied to their perspective, the castration scene is also 'performed' for the spectator. Leclercq is first taken inside and his piercing screams provoke a sense of anticipation in the soldiers, but also in the spectator. When Leclercq is released, Demester refrains from showing any emotional disturbance, while this sudden visibility of Leclercq running in circles in intense pain for what seems an eternity will most likely have a shocking effect on the viewer.

The scene is graphic and leaves little to the imagination, but the most alarming aspect of the extreme violence is, again, Demester's

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Ammar's Muslim background. This is also due to an intertextual reading proffered by Dumont's other films, which incorporate explicit references to Christian themes or iconography.

[164] Melbye characterizes the function of Hollywood indigenous landscapes and their inhabitants as a form of punishment for the characters' imperialist impulse. Melbye does not see a contradiction between an allegorical function of landscape with a specification of historical or geographical characteristics (112).

[165] See Alexandra Heller-Nicholas for a lucid and comprehensive study of rape-revenge narratives and their political and ethical implications. She builds on the work of, amongst others, Carol Clover, Sarah Projansky, Jacinda Read, and Rikke Schubert on representations of rape.

absolute lack of response.[166] His face is not shocked, contemplative, or deliberate, but plainly expressionless. Again, the discrepancy between Demester's stoic reaction, as he does not respond according to the spectator's expectations, and the shocking content of the almost unwatchable scenes becomes an ordeal. Where in previous chapters the focus in torture scenes was placed on the interaction between torturer and tortured (with the exception of Maya and Helen's initial roles as witnesses), in *Flanders* both the presence and position of 'witness' are foregrounded and become crucial. When pressured to watch the scene in which Leclercq runs around in circles in pain, he registers and then eventually drops his head. By obscuring his face, the spectator is once again prevented from interpreting his state of mind. At the same time, the act of dropping his head in itself suggests that the castration might be too much for Demester to watch and that he capitulates to the situation.

The confusion aroused in the spectator is due to the films' fusion of the harsh realism of the *cinéma du corps* and the austere and minimalistic transcendental style. The former has a focus on the body, sex, and violence. *Essential Killing*'s Mohammed was played by Vincent Gallo, a professional (and notorious) actor. *Flanders*' stars, however, are nonprofessional actors, most only appearing in this one film, with unpolished bodies and faces, and as such, they are 'decommodified' (Grønstad on bodies in *cinéma du corps* 2011, 62).[167] It is noteworthy that the film's appropriation of the transcendental style particularly resides in the use of filming techniques: the characters' deadpan acting, and the minimal, static camerawork including long overview shots and close-ups of the characters' faces that function as projection screens for the spectator's own frame of reference. It does not, however, pertain to the violent content and its effect; while inducing tranquillity or contemplation in the spectator when screening the countryside scenes,

[166] Grønstad argues that it is not necessarily aggressive violence that upsets contemporary audiences, but the absence of action, lethargy, or indolence (2012, 66). In this particular situation in *Flanders* the alternation between graphic violence and lethargy is certainly upsetting.

[167] Christopher Sharrett has noted the importance of French Realism to Dumont's work (Part 2).

realised by minimal formal means, the scenes in the warzone are graphic, sudden, brutal, and unmotivated and, as such, framed to incite shock.

The contradiction between transcendental style and *cinéma du corps* is only an ostensible one, as minimal, static camerawork, instead of abundant means, is an unusual method to express graphic content (Verstraten 2011, 40). The transcendental style evokes the experience of slowness and banal everyday life with 'common people', whose boredom is underscored by camerawork (Schrader 61-63). This type of realism is further underscored by *cinéma du corps*' obsession with naked, unpolished bodies, sex acts, and violence (Parker 99), which, because they occur so abruptly and are so explicit and brutal, disrupt the sense of tranquillity created, and might even seem absurd. The Transcendent or inexpressible thus seems closely related to the trivial: sex and death (Guillen; Sharrett Part 1).

The disturbance experienced when watching the scenes of rape and torture is established by thwarting the spectator's anticipation; on the one hand, there is a discrepancy between Demester's and the spectator's reaction, and on the other, there is torture's suddenness, gruesomeness, and duration, or its "on/scenity" (Linda Williams quoted in Grønstad 2011, 62). Chapter 1 analysed why H's torture of Yusuf in *Unthinkable* was not a form of 'torture porn'. The rape and castration scenes in *Flanders* are not examples of torture porn either, for the reasons that the rape is shown predominantly from a distance (through Demester's eyes), and that the castration itself takes place offscreen instead of being meticulously framed. Although Leclercq's castration is not visualised as one would expect in a torture porn film, the (no less) shocking result is.[168]

In *Essential Killing*, the murders are performed rapidly, emphasizing Mohammed's facial expressions rather than the deed itself.

[168] Interestingly, reviews discussing *Unthinkable* either noted the film's graphic images, bordering on 'torture porn', or the film's critical potential due to the incorporation of a moral debate. *Flanders*, however, won the Grand Prix at Cannes and was acclaimed for its aesthetics and for its unsettling depiction of human cruelty, even though or precisely while motivations and morality are absent. See Bradshaw (2007) and Ebert (2007).

The film makes use of long overview shots and long bird's-eye views, yet Mohammed's constant drift through the woods keeps some pace for the film. The acts' tangibility is established by refraining from fully screening them, but the implied killings become palpable and haunting. Conversely, the rape and torture scenes in *Flanders* are shot in long takes and seem to endure, whereas the events between them are either hardly documented, or are also shot in long takes but hardly contextualised. As such, the spectator has to process the graphic and shocking images together with the void in context: where are the soldiers, who are the guerrilla fighters, what do I see, and why does Demester not respond?

The meaning of landscape (2): The soldiers' deterioration

In addition to the opaque geographical characteristics, after Demester's return home as the sole survivor the viewer is spurred to regard the bare and hot wasteland as connoting the soldiers' physical demise (Melbye 99, 109, 112). In *Essential Killing* landscape functioned as an active opponent, but in *Flanders*, the civilians are active opponents responsible for the protagonists' fate. The claustrophobic landscape becomes the stage on which the characters' fates unfold (Grøndstad 2011, 75), and the emphasis comes to lie on the internal group dynamic and the men's struggle for survival.[169] Similarly to *Essential Killing*, the struggle depicted is neither between delineated cultures or ethnicities, nor centres on dismantling terrorist networks, but accentuates the protagonists' vulnerability and demise.[170] Rather than being antiheroes (as the protagonists in *Syriana*, *Body of Lies*, *The Mark of Cain*, and *Brødre/Brothers*), the soldiers are non-heroes that do not compromise their masculinity for the sake of moral decisions, or sacrifice fortitude as pawns of an unjust system. Drawn into a war for which they are obviously ill prepared, they are both cruel and tragic. Like *Essential*

[169] Grønstad argues that Dumont's work is "new-landscape film" which 'frees landscape of its conventional and narratively subordinate role as setting to foreground its function as [a] key feature in the diegetic world of the film [...] and that gives precedence to the language of the body".

[170] Dumont has argued that the war is a collage of multiple wars and landscape signifies the characters' mental states (Stout).

Killing, *Flanders* does not raise or address critical, political, or moral questions concerning violence and war, but inspire the spectator to do so.

To emphasize the soldiers' precarity and demise, two types of landscape are juxtaposed: the cold, wintery countryside of Flanders, and the hot desert of the war zone. The meadows are shown in long shots and resemble photographic or painted images.[171] Covered in puddles and frost, the countryside denotes moroseness and boredom. Where in *Essential Killing* the frost signified Mohammed's death, in *Flanders* the grey-blue colour filters of the peaceful winter landscape run counter to the hot yellow sand of foreign territory. The grimness and vastness of the sandy landscape with ruined and devastated villages become "an emblem of waste and catastrophe" (Sharrett Part 1), and dovetails the soldiers' cruelty with their own fates. The green oasis, through which Demester is seen to run away, could be translated as signifying his survival. Similar to the colour motifs in *Essential Killing*, colour motifs and filters in *Flanders* thus "colour our perception" (Bal 2002, 102) of the two alternating spaces and situations.

The use of natural sound and the lack of (diegetic and non-diegetic) music in *Flanders*, another characteristic of transcendental style (Schrader 69), create a silence and stillness that matches the characters' obtuseness and, later, their demise. The frequent alternation between the violent war zone with noise and gunshots and the rustic sounds of birds and rustling trees in the countryside is blunt. Again, music – or rather, the lack thereof – gains a particular narrative function, but where in *Essential Killing* it particularly emphasizes Mohammed's mental condition, in *Flanders* it underscores the different atmospheres and situations the landscapes evoke.

[171] Dumont notes how he became inspired by the crude landscapes painted by Jeffrey Blondes, and in particular by Georges Braque shortly before making his debut film (5-10). See also Caruana for the resemblance of Dumont's film shots to paintings (113-114). Sharrett has noted the influence of painter Pharaon de Winter on *Humanité*, in which one of the characters bears his name (Part 1).

Barbe's body speech

Barbe, the young woman who remains behind in the countryside, proves to be the most cryptic character and embodies all ambiguities present in *Flanders*. It is implied that she maintains a sensory connection with the soldiers at war, whose brutalities resonate in her body and mind, and her growing emotional instability parallels the soldiers' increasingly precarious situation. Her character is equally opaque yet more expressive and her unexplained sensory insights draw attention to the ways in which her focalisation differs from that of Demester. Due to this connection between Barbe, the soldiers, and, as I argue, the guerrilla woman, it is crucial to further expound Barbe's character and her function in the plot.

Barbe rarely speaks, and instead predominantly communicates through her body. Barbe's bodily speech is realised firstly through aesthetics. Although always outside in all seasons, Barbe looks pale and withdrawn. In summer she has bare legs, wears walking shoes and a jean skirt, and in winter just adds stockings. The use of over-exposure makes her body catch and reflect the sunlight, which produces realistic images of her bare, 'fleshy' body parts. As such, Barbe's body is emphasized through lighting, nakedness, and close-ups of her face. She never smiles, and her face is stern, anxious, or even sad.

Moreover, positioned in a male-dominated rural existence where emotions remain unarticulated and speech is scarce, Barbe's body becomes the method through which she expresses herself to other characters: her sexual encounters with various men establish a primary interaction with fellow locals. These encounters are quick, passionless and banal; Barbe's sexual encounters with Demester bring to mind the mating of stock, an association that arises due to the characters' agrarian environment. The familiarity and naturalness with which they meet under the trees suggests that Barbe and Demester frequently engage in this way.

Shortly after Demester rebuffs Barbe in front of their friends, she picks up Blondel. When they are both at war Barbe instigates meetings with other men. Lying on her back or facing a wall, bending over, she lets the men have sex with her. Each time a close-up of her blank face

shows her staring at the sky or looking into space. Although she does not seem to derive much physical or emotional pleasure from these meetings, they do seem to provide some comfort, not because they satisfy her, but because something has 'happened'. As such, it is suggested that her "beastly mating" (Holden) fills up a social void: Barbe's social circle is very limited and the quiet rural village is the apotheosis of peace for the men at war, but of boredom for Barbe. In this light, these sexual acts can be seen as "performative bodily speech acts", as conceptualized by Judith Butler (2011, xii-xiv, xxiii, 37-38), with which Barbe, in pursuit of connection, recognition, and expression, establishes an elementary form of intelligibility and communication.[172]

As bearers of information, however, Barbe's physical signals are neither picked up by her friends and father, nor reciprocated: they "misfire" (Felman 15) and become meaningless. Her friend France tells her that rumours circulate in which Barbe is depicted as the town slut. At the same time, Barbe discovers she is pregnant. Although she sends Blondel a letter, the real father's identity remains uncertain, and she decides to have an abortion without informing him. Soon after Barbe starts displaying signs of depression, a doctor comes to check on her and recommends that her father commit her to a psychiatric hospital. Her father only sighs, "first the mother, now the daughter". He neither questions the causes of Barbe's condition, nor engages in any form of conversation with his daughter about her troubles. The whereabouts and condition of Barbe's mother are not further touched upon. Her father's reaction spurs the spectator to think Barbe's condition might be the result of a genetic impairment. The previous scenes in the village, however, presented poor social conditions and boredom ingrained in the villagers habitat.[173]

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[172] Mieke Bal notes that in Shoshana Felman's (2003) re-appropriation of J.L. Austin's speech acts, not the vow but rather seduction is considered a prominent *bodily* speech act. Although Barbe initiates, she does not seduce. She just 'does' and the act itself is more important than its outcome (2006, 342).

[173] Bal's analysis of "daughterly speech acts" is interesting in the light of Barbe. Bal analyses the position and speech acts of several women in the Book of Judges. She argues how the daughter's body is acknowledged as a commodity or an economic exchange. The father compensates for his daughter *as* a body by giving the body away (2006, 351-352). Instead of becoming chattel in a forced economic exchange however,

Barbe's sensory intuition

While Barbe uses her body to relate to people, parallel editing suggests that through her mind she is connected to the men at war, whom she 'feels' and 'sees'.[174] Neither her own sexual conduct nor the village's social structure is the catalyst for Barbe's increasing instability, but rather the soldiers' precarious situation and brutal acts. When the men rape the guerrilla woman and are consequently punished for it, the next scenes show Barbe growing progressively emotionally unstable and depressed. This method of crosscutting between the scenes of Barbe's burgeoning moroseness and the increasingly violent and precarious position of the soldiers implies that Barbe's depression is related to the soldiers' grim fate. When admitted to the psychiatric hospital, Barbe is taken to a small room by a young medic. Meanwhile, Demester and Blondel, the two survivors, run for their lives while Barbe suddenly has a nervous breakdown. While making wild gestures with her arms and showing a distorted face, she screams and curses violently "bastard!" While screaming and cursing at the medic, she suddenly attacks him: "I'll fuck you!" Although Barbe curses the medic, it is uncertain whom exactly she addresses, but parallel editing suggests she directs herself towards Demester and Blondel. Incarcerated and sedated in the psychiatric ward, an epitome of Foucaultian discipline and control (1995), Barbe is also subjected to the soldiers' violent acts.

The medic calls for help and Barbe is forced onto the floor by three assistants who tie her arms back and sedate her while she violently struggles to free herself. The next shots show the medic clutching his head in pain and Barbe, who has calmed down and lies on her bed, staring into space with wet eyes and cheeks. As if her crying were a premonition, in the next shot Blondel is shot while trying to escape and left by Demester, who realises he can only save himself.

Barbe initiates her own sexual conduct. Her father, who does not know the nature of her mischief, indirectly punishes her by sending her away.

[174] In F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) a similar connection is suggested between Ellen and Count Orlok: while sleepwalking, Ellen seems to 'see' and 'hear' Orlok and to know what danger awaits her husband who stays with Orlok in his estate. See Verstraten (2009, 101).

The link between Barbe and the soldiers also suggests that Barbe and the raped young woman share a link, or that they even might be the same person (Sharrett Part 2). The two dominant motifs of sex and violence are thus first staged independently, then in tandem, and then intertwined in parallel scenes in which the girl's rape occurs simultaneously with Barbe's breakdown. This connection between the women – and their shared yet inversed bodily act in which one uses sex to communicate and the other is forced into sex – implies an involuntary component to Barbe's previous initiations with the local men: not in the sense that someone else forces her, but that she feels forced to engage with others this way. Additionally, having decided upon an abortion, it is implied that her unwanted pregnancy is the salient negative effect of not only her own sexual interactions that resonate negatively in her body, but also the men's sexual conduct. Barbe does not give reasons for having her pregnancy terminated, and the spectator can only guess.

The fusion of contemplative insights and banal corporeality

The guerrilla woman's revenge is exemplary of Barbe's transformation from morose, to anxiety, to calmness. The castration scene occurs only shortly before Barbe is mysteriously 'healed' again and released from hospital, as if the men's torture, castration, and death undo her own unhealthy condition. In her turn, the guerrilla woman redeems herself by having Leclercq tortured and killed, and proves to be the most unscrupulous fighter.

Rather than seeing Barbe's role of depressed and hysterical woman as traditionally feminine (or as currently fashionable as is Carrie Mathison's character in *Homeland*), and as opposed to male, and medical, rationality (e.g. Tasca et al., 110–119), she becomes a knot of unexplained experiences and unexpressed emotions that result in anxiety. Where the soldiers' blank faces (in particular Demester) are expressionless, Barbe's face, which displays repressed emotions, is contemplative and angelic. She frequently looks up at the sky and reflects daylight, which then shows her points of view of the sunny and cloudy skies. As Darren Hughes argues, these shots seem to embody,

visually and emotionally, Barbe's search for meaning (2002), or they might be, as is argued by Caruana, the result of an existential void (110-111). As such, in the case of Barbe, content and style work together to create a transcendental style: Barbe's eerie sensory intuition is combined with the film's sparse visual and linguistic means that withhold psychologically motivated expressions (Verstraten 2011, 33).

Like the soldiers, the accent on Barbe's fleshy and 'common' body and her sudden explosive anxiety are expressive. The contrast between close-ups of Barbe's radiating face and the emphasis placed on (parts of her) bare body are blunt, and this seems a paradox. Her body, however, reacts to her senses, and poses a crude contrast to the soldiers' banal and brutal violence. Barbe not only underscores the devastating psychological and physical effects of war and violence, but her 'insights' accentuate the empathy the men lack completely. What is left opaque is whether these insights and her bodily reaction are linked to and the result of the men's actions at war, or whether she previously possessed these sensory qualities.

The suggestion of Barbe's sensory insights is again reaffirmed when Barbe forces Demester to talk about his war experiences. When he refuses to speak, she tells him, "I know what you did, I was there". He breaks down, confirms he left Blondel behind and tells Barbe he loves her. Although she does not mention the rape, Barbe's comment indicates she witnessed everything. She confirms she loves him too and strokes his head. Barbe's hysteria and the men's punishment is followed by 'stasis'; the film's elliptical narrative structure again frames Demester and Barbe, yet this time Barbe has a new purpose. Instead of engaging in their usual 'love-making', the embrace becomes an act of motherly affection and forgiveness. Demester's return and declaration of love make her previous sexual acts superfluous.[175]

[175] One of the crucial characteristics pertaining to the transcendental style is 'stasis', which follows on a decisive action ('disparity') taken by the characters. Stasis is a frozen, quiescent scene that follows on disparity and closes the film. This stasis is not the same stable situation that preceded disparity, but harbours a transformation or change established by the decisive action. The new stasis makes the viewer suddenly see emotional depth and meaning in the characters' behaviour (which is still coupled with inexpressive faces and opaque motives) that was not there before (Schrader 82-

Despite the eerie entanglement between Barbe and the soldiers, their respective fates diverge. Although patriarchy and sexual oppression are initially intertwined and reinforced,[176] this association soon falls apart when the soldiers are caught, and one of the men is literally castrated by war. Christopher Sharrett has pointed to the feminism inherent to Dumont's films (Part 1);[177] the men's actions prove destructive, but Barbe's unexplained intuition makes her insightful and emotionally superior. This reversal of gender roles suggests that female intuition as a form of knowledge, and contemplation as a form of self-investigation, are beneficial for one's well-being (Caruana 113). Ultimately punished through torture and death, the men rather than the women are victimized, first by castration, then by nurturing (Demester). This element of nurturing in *Essential Killing* is also present in *Flanders*, yet *w*here in *Essential Killing* the mute woman's care precedes Mohammed's death, Demester finds peace when consoled by Barbe.[178]

Like Mohammed's dream-like memories or memory-like dreams, Barbe's sensory perception is not substantiated enough to

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86). This elliptical scene, in which Demester and Barbe are framed again, is such a stasis. Something has changed for the viewer, but this change is also evident in Demester and Barbe who react more emotionally towards each other. The disparity on which it follows is Barbe's hysteria and the men's punishment, although these scenes are too brutal and expressive to fulfil the role of disparity as defined by Schrader, and mark instead the film's adherence to *cinéma du corps*.

[176] This connection is not only established through the rape and Demester's initial indifference to Barbe, but also by the feminization of the enemy. When first under attack in the village, one of the soldiers shouts, "The cunts aren't finished!" while shooting back (Sharrett Part 2).

[177] Sharrett relates this feminism in particular to the reversal of gender roles as described by Christian narratives and imagery. He compares the painting 'Expulsion' by Massacio (d. 1425), depicting the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, with Dumont's depiction of couples, nudity, and gender.

[178] The specific triangle of sex, violence, and feminism in *Flanders* is reinforced by the image on the front cover of the DVD which is a motif throughout the narrative: it pictures Barbe lying on her back in the grass with Demester on top of her. His head is shaven and Barbe's piercing light blue eyes look straight into the camera. This peaceful scene is framed within the shape of a helmet that together with Demester's shaven head evoke war, while Barbe's stern and contemplating face is accentuated. In comparison to the DVD cover images from *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*, *Syriana*, *Body of Lies*, *The Mark of Cain*, *Brødre/Brothers*, and *Essential Killing*, in which symbols of war, geopolitics, and the War on Terror are prominently displayed, Barbe's embrace and her piercing eyes on the cover of *Flanders* are decidedly different.

make firm statements about it. Although it is implied that she has some sort of spiritual insight, this as such remains unarticulated, and it is left to the spectator to contemplate and decide upon the potential meanings of Barbe's sensory knowledge. Her insights are juxtaposed to a political frame of rape and, as is suggested, imperial oppression. *Flanders* builds on war films in which male superiority and heterosexuality is affirmed, but the film subverts these expectations when the characters' internal lack of cohesion, awkward ineptness, and sexual frustration backfires in a grotesque way. The role of Barbe as the female protagonist and the role of the guerrilla woman draw attention to the scarcity of female protagonists in War on Terror films, the role of women as identification figures when they are present, and the intricate relationship between sex, femininity, and torture as discussed in Chapter 1. Barbe as a female character is not, however, easily definable within any particular film genre, and by Hollywood terms, she is an unconventional character. At the same time, all characters in *Flanders* (and, for that matter, in *Essential Killing*) whether male of female are democratically unconventional and impervious. The film is both fascinating and puzzling precisely because the spectator is left to contemplate the extent to which the castration's resemblance to Christian iconography is implemented seriously or ironically,[179] and the extent to which Barbe's insights function as a comment on patriarchal oppression and warfare.

Identification: Scenes that disturb and disturbing scenes

A significant difference between *Essential Killing* and *Flanders* pertains to their pursued affective impact; while *Essential Killing* incites confusion and contemplation, in *Flanders*, the response of shock, established by narrative techniques of visibility and duration, seems explicitly aimed for. This difference can be traced back to a distinction between scenes that disturb and disturbing scenes (Grønstad 2011, 4,

[179] As an "atheist haunted by religion", as Caruana describes Dumont (101), evoking religious imagery is not a trope but, as Van Alphen notes, an anti-trope: it subverts conventional, static meanings and is broadened for multiple interpretations (2001, 14).

6), as briefly addressed in Chapter 2. *Essential Killing* frames brutal but not graphic violence, and it presents images that disturb, but not necessarily disturbing images. *Flanders*, on the other hand, depicts disturbing, brutal, as well as graphic violence that has a disturbing effect. The torture scene's shock value not only stems from the sudden graphic scenes, but also from the discrepancy between character and spectatorial reaction – Demester's emotionlessness and ostensible moral lacuna – when watching brutal and graphic scenes. When it becomes impossible to watch the violent scenes the spectator is impelled to close her eyes or look away.

After shock has waned, disturbance lingers on as the spectator continues to ruminate on the cumulative effect of *Flanders*' graphic shots, its dovetailing of stillness with outbursts of violence, the characters' stoicism, the unexplained elements in the plot, and the film's anti-climactic, static ending.[180] After watching *Unthinkable*, which is equally graphic and brutal, the moral questions raised do not linger because all aspects of the moral dilemma are spelled out and chewed upon by the characters. In *Essential Killing,* a sense of relief is evoked when it is suggested that Mohammed has found peace in death and his ordeal is over, although the ending remains cryptic. Despite Barbe's consolation of Demester, little relief or sense of pleasure is evoked when watching *Flanders*, which makes *Flanders* an intense viewing experience.

The difference in affective impact between *Essential Killing* and *Flanders* also translates in the sympathy evoked for the protagonists. Where *Essential Killing* aligns the spectator to Mohammed's state of deprivation, rendered by the unstable camera and intense close-ups of his face, *Flanders* creates a distance between spectator and screen. Mohammed's actions are justifiable, and therefore also understandable and possibly recognisable, and so the spectator might feel concern for

[180] As Grønstad notes, the 'unwatchable' character of a film resides in the film's ability to "trounce visual pleasure and shake the spectators into a deeper awareness" of that which is seen in political, ethical, and cultural terms (2012, 10-11). *Flanders* not only aims for shock effect, but also for a sense of unsettlement that lingers and leads to critical deliberation and a moral judgement of the soldiers' actions.

his fate. *Flanders*' characters, even Barbe, are too taciturn and opaque to identify with.[181]

Conclusion

This chapter has probed the relationship between an opaque political context and disturbing images of brutal or graphic violence, and their consequences for interpreting the films' plots. Political references to the War on Terror are left implicit in *Essential Killing* and *Flanders*, and therefore a realistic depiction of a real political context is less important than in the films analysed previously. A reading of the films as War on Terror films is partially inspired by a historically dependent post-9/11 frame, yet the narratives are often highly ambiguous and invite multiple, sometimes contradictory interpretations established by acting, camerawork, colour motifs, music, and speech.

In *Essential Killing*, references to the War on Terror, unexplained situations and fragments, alluring aesthetics, and camerawork that expresses Mohammed's state of mind establish an eerie atmosphere. *Flanders* fuses *cinéma du corps* – which focuses on the body, sexual intercourse, and violence – 'decommodified' actors, and a transcendental style, developed through techniques that employ minimal, static, and inexpressive formal means. This way of filming aims for contemplation as well as shock.

Rather than being easily categorizable into genres or styles, *Essential Killing* and *Flanders* play with the spectator's urge for the illusion of cinematic realism, intelligibility and coherence, and formal and stylistic expectations. In *Flanders* geographical locations and the ethnicity of the soldiers' opponents are ambiguous or even indeterminable. Torture is inflicted as a form of punishment for, in particular, rape and murder, and perhaps more generally, patriarchal oppression and imperialism. Similarly, although references to America's detainee treatment in prisons such as Guantanamo Bay are suggested in

[181] Paul Schrader has argued that "the two things Bresson eschews are action and empathy". Sontag similarly notes that for Bresson's films identification with characters is impossible and imagined (1967, 181). One could argue the same for Dumont's films (Brooke).

Essential Killing, geographical specificities and political references are further omitted, and torture proves to be the catalyst of a narrative about survival and deprivation.

In addition to the lack of contextual information and speech, Mohammed's ethnic background is cryptic in *Essential Killing*. On the one hand, the film plays with discursive 'Arab terrorist' or 'Arab barbarian' tropes by naming him 'Mohammed'. On the other, Italian-American actor Vincent Gallo's personification of 'Mohammed' make his supposedly 'Arab background' by no means evident. In any case, Mohammed's murders committed in self-defence are justified and understandable to the spectator, who is closely attached to Mohammed's point of view.

In *Flanders*, however, the soldiers' lack of obvious motivations, self-reflexivity, and responsibility, and the impulsive nature of their violence make their acts outrageous and incomprehensible. The viewer's distance from the soldiers is further reinforced through Demester's ambivalent, stoic gaze. In *Essential Killing* the figure of Mohammed plays with the concepts of 'terrorist' and 'barbarian', while in *Flanders* the presumably French soldiers are 'barbarian' but also tragic.

The decidedly political aspect of the films' depiction of torture resides in the ways in which the War on Terror is evoked but not made explicit, and also in the ways in which the spectator, spurred to fill in the political and moral voids, is expected to project a broad array of personal beliefs, presuppositions, and normative ideas onto the films' plot and characters. While in *Essential Killing* Mohammed's intense emotional expressions present guidelines for making some sense of his internal world, *Flanders* neither proposes moral nor psychologically motivated clues. The lack of context and motivation and the characters' blank facial expressions are, to an extent, mediated by the bodily responses of Barbe, who maintains a sensory connection to the soldiers' brutal acts and the guerrilla woman's gruesome revenge. Although Barbe's character underscores the devastating psychological and physical effects of war, rape, and torture, her unexplained sensory

insights are only suggested through editing and take on meaning through the spectator's engagement with the film.

Both films experiment with representations of harrowing, visceral, or even graphic violence and torture by providing little contextual information and by playing with viewing expectations, after which the spectator leaves the cinema unsettled (*Essential Killing*) and disturbed (*Flanders*).