Conclusion

In this study I have analysed how North-American and European films have depicted post-9/11 political torture. Exploring this particular theme has illustrated various ways in which cinema and societal issues interact in hyper-mediated Western culture. This study demonstrates the research relevance of political torture as a contentious issue both in real life and as a fictionalized, stylized form of screen violence, and also examines how culture, politics, and art convene in cinema to engage with and shape aspects of contemporary or historical realities we find difficult to witness and process.

I examined War on Terror films made between 2004 and 2012. All of these films share a Western heterogeneous yet still ethnocentric perspective on the War on Terror and Muslim otherness, which means they incorporate ethical, political, and moral questions about the use of political torture (conditions surrounding, motivations for, and consequences of), while also broadly addressing the West's share in the geopolitics of the War on Terror. I conceptualized the logic of filmic political torture as a perverse and violent 'role-play' between characters – torturer and tortured – that is scripted and performed for a diegetic audience in the film as well as a spectator of the film. This concept of role-play demonstrates each film's particular perspective on the use of torture and the relevance of analysing the use of ethnic and gender tropes in relation to those who torture and those who are tortured on screen.

Significant differences can, however, be identified between the aesthetic and political focal points of the American and European films studied, particularly concerning how they formulate perspectives on political torture, both as a topical political issue and as a particular form of screen violence. In European film the diegetic political context of the War on Terror is less delineated and less prominent than in American films. Further, European cinema did not experience the same post-9/11

upsurge of productions depicting torture that characterized American cinema. This means that the themes of 'fighting terrorism' and torture occur in European films from this period, but not necessarily in tandem. This is the result of the European films' focus on the personal, psychological effects of those involved in torture and war, rather than on action or fighting terrorism. Due to this focus, political situations or issues, such as the motivations for war and torture and the opponent's ethnicity, are made secondary.

In contrast, American films released around 2007/2008, responding to the Abu Ghraib abuses and anti-war public sentiment, began to question the rhetorical War on Terror, as well as the actual combat wars in the Middle East. The patriotism, embodied by the white male hero, that prospered in American cinema shortly after 9/11 is hesitantly negotiated by starring female protagonists and the figure of the antihero. While accentuating bodily vulnerability, risk, and exposure on both sides, these films question America's part in a perpetual cycle of violence and retaliation, without necessarily adjusting the image of the barbarian Muslim villain. The Muslim characters in *Syriana* (2005), *Body of Lies* (2008), and *Brothers* (2009) ostensibly inflict unjust and cruel torture as a punitive method, motivated by revenge. On the one hand, this motivation accentuates the vicious cycle of violence, instigated by terrorists as well as the US; on the other hand, terrorists' use of torture introduces Muslim culture as homogeneously backward and essentially evil. While self-reflexively questioning American interference in the Middle East, the depiction of Muslims as barbarian thus eventually legitimizes and necessitates military action to safeguard peace and stability in the films.

Although an American film, *Syriana*'s multifocal and multi-ethnic perspective formulates a critique of America's imperialist activities that provides a meta-view on the War on Terror. The film positions the rise of terrorism and the occurrence of torture as partially indebted to decades of shifting political and economic interests and backdoor deals made by both the US and Middle Eastern countries. The acknowledgement of the roots of the War on Terror in previous,

historical conflicts distinguishes *Syriana* from the other films in this study that do not provide such historical context for the War on Terror.

Unthinkable and *Zero Dark Thirty*, made in 2010 and 2012, are ticking bomb scenarios that depict the torture of Muslims as interrogational and as a necessary objective. Although encouraged by the urgency to prevent the next attack and framed within the national trauma of 9/11, upon closer look *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable*'s torture scenes are brutal and infused with punitive elements that stress not only the detainees' barbarism, but also that of the torturer. In different ways, *Unthinkable* and *Zero Dark Thirty* reveal the logic behind extra-legal torture, yet this plays out differently in each film: *Unthinkable* proposes a self-reflexive critique of the FBI's use of torture in interrogations. It stages graphic, vivisectionist violence that shows the physical damage caused by torture, while simultaneously subverting normative ethnic tropes pertaining to torturer and tortured. *Zero Dark Thirty*'s 'torture-lite' reveals the particularly dehumanizing nature of torture while it maintains the binary between Muslim terrorist and morally superior, predominantly white, CIA.

Whereas in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* interrogation is introduced as the only motivation for torture while punishment is a covert incentive, the geopolitical action films *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* touch on interrogations, but instead focus on the damaging effects of American political interference. Torture occurs as a side effect of such interference, in which the punitive elements underlying torture are made explicit and intertwined with a political critique formulated by the Muslim torturer. The different centre of attention in these two films has formal consequences for the way in which the torture scenes are shaped: the scenes in *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* are single short scenes, while in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* a great amount of screen time and plot are assigned to depicting torture.

The first two chapters of this thesis illustrate that, although the torture perpetrated by American CIA agents is ostensibly depicted as less harsh and more justified than the torture inflicted by Muslim terrorists, this is not entirely the case: in their own manner, the four films draw attention to the use of torture as a self-justifying strategy to

punish and thereby affirm and reaffirm the inherent, mutual difference between American agents and Muslim fundamentalists.

The main question addressed in *The Mark of Cain* and *Brødre/ Brothers* in Chapter 3 is how loyal one can stay to oneself after being involved in the torture of others as a soldier, and the subsequent struggle to return to society as a veteran. The turn away from the geopolitical stage to the personal experience of the War on Terror in Chapter 3 reveals the different thematic accents within American and European cinema: that on action surrounding and motivation for torture in the former, and on consequences of torture in the latter.

In *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* information gathering was crucial to the plot, while in *The Mark of Cain* (2007) torture inflicted by UK soldiers is not cloaked as a necessary objective to gather information, but explicitly aims to humiliate Iraqi detainees. Additionally, the use of torture and the role-play between torturer and tortured are secondary to the situation preceding torture, the conditions facilitating it, and torture's aftermath. While in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* torture is given emphasis and significant screen time, in *The Mark of Cain* the torture scenes are short, fragmented, and interspersed throughout the plot. This way of editing illustrates that the accent does not lie on the torture itself but on its traumatic consequences for those involved.

A comparison between *Brødre* (2004) and its American adaptation *Brothers* (2009) underscores the diverging focal points of European War on Terror films. The soldiers' semi-forced (*The Mark of Cain*) and forced (*Brødre* and *Brothers*) participation in torture fuses the status of victim of torture with culprit. *Brothers*, however, halts between a critique of warfare and a heroic conception of warfare, and between a specific critique of America's meddling in Afghanistan and a depiction of the Taliban as barbaric and evil torturers. As in the American productions *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*, and *Body of Lies*, *Brothers* is built on action, a characteristic of its genre, and on expression and motivation, aspects of *mise-en-scène* that attach the spectator to the characters and the decisions made by them.

Brødre, on the contrary, withholds the explicit political and moral undercurrent visible in *Brothers* and, as does *The Mark of Cain*, downplays the importance of the enemy's identity. More importantly, in *Brødre* torture, as a plot element, is reduced to such a function that it, as a traumatising episode, could be replaced with any other horrible event.

The use of torture as instigator of a traumatic episode in Chapters 3 and 4 illustrates that the American films tend to address political themes more directly and explicitly, without necessarily weighing them in critical terms. The discursive War on Terror rhetoric is more potently framed in American politics and, consequently, in Hollywood film, than in European politics and cinema. Interrogational torture, for example, a characteristic of the ticking bomb scenario, is a staple of the American films while the European films, such as *The Mark of Cain*, illustrate that the incentive to torture for interrogational purposes is less powerful. Instead, the European films feature human cruelty, moral weakness, and the unstable mind. Their narratives are thus neither a more nor less critical evaluation of the War on Terror and the use of torture, but share a preference for depicting the human, interpersonal side of the combat and rhetorical Wars. Further, in *Essential Killing* (2010) and *Flanders* (2006) the diegetic political context, or the way in which political and social verisimilitude is constructed, and the protagonists' and their opponents' ethnicity are even downgraded into barely definable geographical, political, and cultural parameters, despite the fact that war, violence, and torture are prominent features of the plot.

The analysis of the last two films in Chapter 4 allows me to claim that, despite the diverging thematic accents between these American and European films, punishment, by inflicting pain or embarrassment or both, is the pivotal (covert or obvious) motivation for inflicting torture in all case studies, regardless of the situation in which torture occurs. Torture as punishment is inflicted in *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*, and *The Mark of Cain* for Muslim ethnicity and terrorist activities; in *Syriana*, *Body of Lies*, *Brødre/Brothers*, and presumably also *Essential Killing* for having a Western cultural background and for

Western political intervention; and in *Flanders* for the soldiers' previous war crimes.

This focus on moral decisions and personal costs in European film translates into different narrative structures and modes of spectatorship, in which the American films generally and predominantly build on a passive viewing attitude, while the European films exploit a distance between spectator and screen to invite the viewer to develop a critical, self-reflexive attitude.

Zero Dark Thirty, *Unthinkable, Body of Lies*, and *Brothers* make use of classic causality narration, in which coherent action and expression and clear internal relationships stimulate an acceptance of that which is presented to the viewer, while leaving open the possibility of critical reflexivity. Unlike the seamless narration of *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*, and *Body of Lies*, *Syriana*'s complex form and composite character create a distance between spectator and screen. It inspires the viewer to develop a critical, potentially ethical awareness of conflicting geopolitical interests and the related use of weapons, violence, and torture, using an unconventional narrative structure and approach – or even strategy – in Hollywood.

The Mark of Cain and *Brødre* employ narrative fragmentation to suggest that an account of trauma is necessarily as incoherent as the manifestation and experience of trauma itself. *The Mark of Cain* makes use of atemporal and distorted narration and *Brødre* creates a feeling of intimacy bordering on claustrophobia, naturalistically expressed through editing and camerawork, to suggest the events' traumatic nature. In *The Mark of Cain*, the duality that arises between sufficient comprehension of the protagonist's emotional turbulence and the plot's unsatisfactory conclusion due to ambivalent focalisation coerces the viewer to consider the questions raised by the film about personal and collective violent excesses and culpability. In this respect, the American *Syriana* and British *The Mark of Cain* create a similar viewing position through different narrative structures and for different reasons.

Even more than *The Mark of Cain*, the European art-house films *Essential Killing* and *Flanders* use unconventional narrative structure to

play with the spectator's urge for causality, internal relations, intelligibility, and genre expectations, which compels the viewer to actively interpret while the ability to invest coherence and meaning is often withheld. Apart from the opaque political and geographical information, both films refrain from incorporating moral imperatives, which are to be actively supplied by the spectator's own frames of reference. Yet while in *Essential Killing* intense facial expressions provide clues about the protagonist's internal world, *Flanders* withholds psychologically-motivated behaviour and emotional expression. Additionally, rape, murder, and torture are not only sudden but also often unmotivated and therefore staged to incite shock. The lack of expressed morality, motivation, and emotion together with the brutal violence make *Flanders* the most unsettling viewing experience of the films discussed in this study.

The unmotivated violence in *Flanders* shows that when watching depictions of torture, facial expressions and moral characters are crucial for 'reading' or interpreting the torture scenes in political and moral terms. Even when characters are not moral characters that explicate their agenda to the viewer, facial expressions prove to be crucial clues, particularly when narratives become less causally motivated and the characters more opaque.

The importance of moral imperatives, motivation, and expression explain some of the issues *Zero Dark Thirty*'s critics had with the film's torture scenes. Protagonist Maya plays a crucial role in processing these scenes: as a witnessing bystander, her point-of-view shots and the reverse shots of her facial expressions first urge the spectator to deem the role-play embarrassing and cruel. When she takes over the role of interrogator herself this transition occurs in tandem with the increasing opacity of her internal world and moral viewpoint. All the spectator sees are the actions she undertakes and growing purposefulness in finding bin Laden, while her stance concerning the justifiability and efficacy of torture remains vague. A duality therefore arises in which it is implied that torture is a humiliating yet necessary means to an end in finding Osama bin Laden.

This screening of torture as both disgusting and necessary without providing the moral tools in which to frame it is undercut by the plot's long time lapses that suggest causality where this is not necessarily true. The film's ambivalence, I argue, in terms of Maya's character, moral agenda, and the film's use of causality, evade the question of the justifiability and effectiveness of torture altogether. Maya thus comes to function as a convenient projection screen for the spectator's various emotions, ideas, and political and moral beliefs, and both positions, for or against torture, could eventually be endorsed by both spectator and film depending on subjective interpretation.

When films are based on real events, like *Zero Dark Thirty* and *The Mark of Cain*, this makes them liable to criticism concerning how they retell these events, by suggesting causality as part of a realistic diegetic discourse in the way *Zero Dark Thirty* does, or simply because they mould politically sensitive events into melodramatic or action formats. Although *The Mark of Cain* does not aspire to present a truthful account of the real torture case which inspired it, the film's rendering of the British military was nonetheless greeted with hostility and the plot was subjected to the 'reality' test. *Zero Dark Thirty*, on the contrary, does not only employ suggestive causality to create cinematic realism, but also purports to present a seemingly near-referential account of the hunt for bin Laden while posing as more truthful to reality than it really is. The criticism this claim – of being more accurate and truthful than other fictional forms – inspired does not, I argue, reside in the spectators' incapability of distinguishing the fictional world from the real world, but in being no longer willing to engage in a game of make-believe with this film.

Zero Dark Thirty constructs a socially and politically probable diegetic world, leaves moral and political judgements of torture aside, and plays with causality conventions in a way that diverges from how popular films usually employ classic, rigorous causality to spoon-feed internal relationships and viewpoints to the viewer. As the audience expects internal relationships in *Zero Dark Thirty* where they are not, the fuss about *Zero Dark Thirty* is informative of how narrative structures and techniques and formal conventions both steer and

disrupt viewing expectations: these means determine how the spectator is likely to process the use of torture and to perceive the political situation surrounding its use.

The case of *Zero Dark Thirty* provides an explicit example, but in broader terms, the various ways in which the films in this study tell their stories and depict political torture lead the spectator to question normative ideas, beliefs, and presuppositions concerning the use of torture, as well as the ways in which torture is 'told' by particular narrative formats.

Analysis of the variety of means employed by the films to depict political torture leads me back to a question posed in the first chapter. What is the relationship between context, content, and form, or more precisely, between the specificities and verisimilitude of the diegetic political context and how, or to what degree, torture is framed in War on Terror films? I argued that the more referential and authentic to real life the political context, as in *Zero Dark Thirty*, the less graphic (but not necessarily less brutal) the violence that is framed. *Unthinkable*'s graphic torture and moral characters suggest that such a depiction needs the company of a moral debate to prevent the torture from becoming 'torture porn'. In reverse, such a debate requires the simultaneous depiction of graphic torture to underscore the need for a debate about the use of torture. *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*' geopolitical contexts were explicated and crucial features of the narrative, while torture was presented within the parameters of the 'watchable'. In Chapter 3, *The Mark of Cain*'s reference to an actual torture episode made the framing of the torture of suspected Iraqi detainees a delicate issue, while in *Brødre*/*Brothers* the accent was placed on the traumatic consequences of warfare and of punitive torture, and again the torture itself took place predominantly off-screen. In *Essential Killing* and *Flanders* the political nature of torture is principally invested by the spectator's own frames of reference. Although *Unthinkable*, which presents crude violence, also reduces the political context to secondary importance, the 'decontextualization' in *Essential Killing* and *Flanders*' offers greater freedom to portray graphic and unrelenting depictions of

torture. In *Flanders* this opportunity is in fact taken but is not in *Essential Killing*, although it does, however, suggest the brutality of its violence precisely by keeping it predominantly off-screen.

Comparison shows that, apart from *Unthinkable* and *Flanders*, all films only suggestively visualise torture. This, firstly, indicates that the spectacle of torture, in the sense of detailed and explicit visibility and the gore that characterizes the genre of 'torture porn', is not a prevailing element of War on Terror films, whether American or European.

Furthermore, the American case studies prove that such a connection between authenticity and aesthetics – the more referential the political context, the less graphic the violence that is framed – can be substantiated. This characteristic can be attributed not only to the specificities of the diegetic political framework in which these torture episodes take place on screen, but also to particular political and financial interests and constraints that influence a Hollywood film's eventual content; the fact that *Unthinkable* was banned from theatres underscores this premise. This argument cannot be fully substantiated here however, as it requires more research into how Hollywood's commercial industry regulates graphic screen violence as part of a probable or even referential diegetic political context.

Although not graphic, torture in American film is not depicted as less brutal. All depictions of torture in this study are either disturbing, due to their content, or disturb because they emotionally affect the spectator or inspire her to reflect on moral, cultural, and political issues forwarded by the narratives. Such internal relationships between a diegetic political context and framing torture do not, however, occur in European cinema, which instead makes use of different aesthetic, political, and commercial benchmarks. Rather, this cinema navigates between providing a social and political commentary on the consequences of war and terrorism, and experimenting with conventional forms of narration that depict graphic violence and translate subjective experience.

The depictions of political torture in a War on Terror context in American and European cinema seem to have waned in recent films, yet only in another decade will we be able to gauge the full impact of the ways in which American and European cinema have featured the use of political torture during the War on Terror, and how these films have addressed its political, moral, and cultural implications. Additionally, future studies must provide more insight into how these cinemas address recent developments in the Middle East, such as the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the current war in Syria, and how they shape and refurbish ideologies pertaining to topical forms of weaponry and adversaries. For now, this study contributes to ongoing debates about the relationship between violent times and violent cinema, and about the aesthetics and politics of screen violence.