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# The Rise of Dark Americana: Depicting the “War on Terror” On-Screen

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*In the wake of the 9/11 attacks the American film industry took a while to react to the Islamist threat at home and abroad. From 2005, however, Hollywood responded to the threat to the homeland and the War on Terror “over there” in Iraq and Afghanistan in a variety of ways. This article examines the nature of that response and whether it evinces, as critics allege, that the American film industry reflects and shapes a capitalist and imperialist agenda. More particularly, by evaluating the cinematic treatment of both the Iraq war and the problem of surveillance, rendition, and homeland security, the analysis explores what this distinctive on-screen genre tells about how the U.S. cultural mainstream has dealt with the challenge global jihadism poses to American values. The analysis suggests that post-9/11 movie making, while sometimes bleak and often clichéd, is cognizant of the gray area morality inherent in fighting the “War on Terror,” and is still thus able to offer some possibilities for sophisticated reflection.*

Writing shortly after the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 the novelist Martin Amis observed:

But no visionary cinematic genius could hope to recreate the majestic abjection of that double surrender, with the scale of the buildings conferring its own slow motion. It was well understood that an edifice so demonstrably comprised of concrete and steel would also become an unforgettable metaphor.<sup>1</sup>

A decade later Peter Bradshaw, reviewing the cinematic response to the 9/11 attacks on New York and the Pentagon for *The Guardian*, thought that they had “smashed Hollywood’s monopoly on myth-making and image production.” Bradshaw contended that the attacks “were themselves a kind of counter-cinema, a spectacle very possibly inspired by the art-form, but rendering obsolete any comparable fictions it had to offer.”<sup>2</sup> In this assessment Bradshaw was offering a similar, if less eloquent, understanding to that of eighteenth-century politician and philosopher Edmund Burke who argued that

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the power of the sublime consists in “whatever is qualified to cause terror.” As he presciently discerned, “the nearer it approaches the reality, and the further it removes us from all idea of fiction, the more perfect is its power.”<sup>3</sup> Real terror, he suggested, renders its representation in tragedy unsatisfactory.

Hollywood’s initial reaction to 9/11, according to filmmaker and film historian Wheeler Winston Dixon, was as if it “considered silence the only patriotically supportive response,” evincing an unwillingness either to acknowledge or mythologize the attack.<sup>4</sup> In the aftermath of 9/11 “Hollywood momentarily abandoned the hyperviolent spectacles that dominated late 1990s cinema.” Projects were shelved and family-centered feel good films “rushed into release.”<sup>5</sup> Islamist-inspired violence, with its craving for drama and spectacle, had assaulted not only America’s self-image but struck “a devastating blow at imagination, and maybe for a while enfeebled the reputation of cinema and all the arts.”<sup>6</sup>

But, then again, perhaps not. After a brief hiatus, the period from 2005 to 2014 witnessed filmmakers responding, uncertainly and in their different ways, to the impact of 9/11 on New York, America, and the subsequent response at home and abroad. Films like Paul Greengrass’s *United 93* (2006) and Oliver Stone’s *World Trade Center* (2006) confronted the impact of the terror on ordinary Americans caught up in the day of the attacks. Somewhat differently, movies like *Transformers* (2007) or *Cloverfield* (2008) addressed the phenomenon obliquely, as a “modish” reference or *mis-en-scène* where the world of death and war is present. It “gets a mention, but then is rendered irrelevant to the story or the star.”<sup>7</sup>

From 2005 it is also possible to identify a number of films and television series that spoke directly about the aftermath of 9/11 when “The world saw evil,” as Oliver Stone’s melodramatic trailer to *World Trade Center* put it.<sup>8</sup> Beginning in 2005 with *Syriana* to *American Sniper* in 2014, movies dealt explicitly with the post-9/11 world, placing protagonists “in naturalistic Middle East settings and at the apex of conflict” in order to explore “the intricacies, tensions and pressures of the situation.”<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, films and TV shows like *Rendition* (2007), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), *Homeland* (2011–2015), and *A Most Wanted Man* (2014) explored the problem of intelligence, intelligence failure, and the consequent political and security challenges arising from a war that, according to Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) official, Buzzy Krongard, would be fought “in large measure by forces you do not know about, in actions you will not see and in ways you may not want to know about.”<sup>10</sup> Vice President Dick Cheney prefaced this era, stating on 16 September 2001, that in order to accomplish this goal the United States would have to “work on the dark side.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, if we wish to specify a genre of post-9/11 filmic approaches we might term this the rise of “Dark Americana.”<sup>12</sup>

The question, then, is what light does an analysis of Hollywood filmography shed on the dark side and the distinctive threat posed by Islamist violence after 9/11? What do these films tell us more particularly about secular, modern, Western liberal political values, and the manner in which they confront *jihadi* activism at home and abroad? How, too, should we assess the political impact of such cinematic representations?

The argument here is that an analysis of the origins, premises, and evolution of the Dark Americana genre does not validate the contentions of contemporary critical media theory that suggests filmmakers are either passively uncritical towards, or enthusiastically supportive of, U.S. foreign policy. On the contrary, post-9/11 films often engage with many political themes that media studies theory claims they ignore. The category of Dark Americana is therefore a useful descriptor that captures a thoughtful, skeptical, and frequently critical appreciation of the Western engagement with the post-9/11 challenge.

Finally, it will be suggested that unlike either nescient critical media theory or the pat heroics of Hollywood tropes, this genre of filmography, for all its mood of dark moral ambivalence, offers a more convincing set of opportunities to recuperate a sense of Western purpose and self-understanding.

### Life is Gray: The Origins of Dark Americana

As a concept “Dark Americana” stands in contrast to a dominant mode of cinematic portrayal that asserts largely positive American self-imagery. “Classic Americana” accentuated robust stereotypes of the heroic and the virtuous, where principled, if sometimes maverick, characters struggle against the odds in battles of obvious moral polarity, allowing “good” to eventually prevail over evil. Conversely, Dark Americana recognizes a world of moral ambiguity and emotional complexity. Here, after 9/11, we see the evolution of an artistic current that perceives political life existing in degrees of dysfunction. Characters, often flawed, are trapped in social systems, hierarchies, or incompetent bureaucracies where doing the right thing is neither easy nor obvious. Dramatic tension comes not with high tempo action sequences resulting in the traditional, predictable, dénouement—the triumph of the good guys—but from character development, interconnected storylines, and the struggles that characters have with the dilemmas imposed by their social imprisonment. The important question generated by the category of Dark Americana is, essentially, how does one retain a sense of right conduct in a world of contingency? How does one negotiate the “real” where life is rarely black and white but various shades of gray?

Arguably, the first, and perhaps most transcendent, example of Dark Americana was Home Box Office (HBO)’s epic, non-award winning, *The Wire*: co-creators David Simon’s and Ed Burns’s unforgiving depiction of the drugs war in Baltimore. Extolled as the greatest television program ever made, *The Wire*, according to Kevin Carey, “attempts to tell nothing less than the central story of the modern age: the struggle of individuals to maintain their identity in the face of relentlessly dehumanising institutions.”<sup>13</sup> In this world good people do bad things and bad people do good things, yet “The Wire refuses to make black-and-white judgements about them. Its prevailing moral universe is grey. . . . The Wire is deliberately dense, dark and difficult to watch.”<sup>14</sup>

Screened between 2002 and 2008, *The Wire* bridged the period of Hollywood quietude when filmmakers appeared reluctant to grapple with the enormity of 9/11. The War on Terror Functions as the *mis-en-scène* at various periods in seasons one and two of *The Wire* (2002–2003), either sucking vital resources away from the war on drugs or else compromising important counternarcotics operations. Running concurrently with *The Wire* was Twentieth Century Fox’s somewhat more formulaic *The Shield* (2002–2008), which can also be viewed as an early exemplar of Dark Americana, where a special unit of Los Angeles cops are portrayed as unrelentingly brutal and corrupt (if often very effective at what they do). Both programs set the standard in defying the usual “mystery solved–case closed” police procedural,<sup>15</sup> and formed the basis for further small screen explorations into America’s dark soul with series like *True Detective* (2014–), the more tongue-in-cheek *noir* of *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013), and *House of Cards* (2013–), and culminating in the explicitly post-9/11 *Homeland* (from 2011 onward), discussed further below.

Like most things, film genres do not arise from nowhere, and Dark Americana cannot be said simply to have been a spontaneous reaction solely to the aftermath of 9/11. Tempting as it is to trace the genre back to classic 1940s American *film noir* exemplified

by movies like *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *The Big Sleep* (1946), which emphasized cynical and predatory motivations but that nevertheless invariably resolved their plots through the traditional mystery solved–case closed process, it would be more accurate to trace this style of production to what Francis Wheen has described as the “Golden age of paranoia” in the mid-1970s.<sup>16</sup> Repressed post-Vietnam disillusionment, Watergate, increasing revelations of CIA and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) wrongdoing, manifested itself artistically in a spate of political conspiracy films like *The Parallax View* (1974), *The Conversation* (1974), *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), *All the President’s Men* (1976), and *Capricorn One* (1978). In these movies, corporate and political interests were presented behaving with degrees of subterfuge and deception, and invariably with a penchant for extra-judicial assassination. In contrast to the Hollywood heroics of old, here the very institutions of U.S. governance were questioned, suspected, and denounced as malign and untrustworthy.<sup>17</sup>

The evolution of the political conspiracy thriller gave way to a more creative era of filmmaking that allowed writers and directors to interrogate the dissonances in U.S. society with more honesty, and in a manner that can be seen as providing a line of continuity in the later development of post-9/11 cinema. In the televisual form, however, the origins of Dark Americana owed at least a partial debt to the dominant influence of British TV drama during the 1970s and 1980s. For example, Thames Television’s *The Sweeney* (1975–1978) really for the first time portrayed the police as uncouth, routinely violent, corner cutting, and not always successful in winning out against the criminals. It was perhaps, though, the BBC’s dramatization of John le Carré’s 1974 novel, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1979) that signaled the potential of television to engage with gray-area morality: a melancholic meditation on veteran spy George Smiley’s search for a Soviet mole within the Secret Intelligence Service. *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* was not so much a “whodunit” (from the beginning there are only three possible suspects and intimations that Smiley already has a good idea of the probable identity of the mole) but a “how-did-they-do-it?” The old, bespectacled Smiley—a master at espionage but bewildered in life generally—shuffles across the gloomy social landscape of post-imperial Britain uncovering the often superlative way in which the mole has maneuvered themselves into position by playing on personal rivalries, vanity, and bureaucratic factionalism. So powerful and atmospheric was the rendering that prominent expressions from the le Carré espionage lexicon (“mole,” “insurance,” “babysitter”)<sup>18</sup> and actual or paraphrased lines of dialogue from *Tinker, Tailor* and its equally celebrated sequel, *Smiley’s People* (1982),<sup>19</sup> reappear in *Homeland* as an explicit *homage*.

By the 1990s the preeminence of British TV drama was fading in the face of greater multimedia/multichannel competition and the rehabilitation of quality U.S. television led by the likes of HBO.<sup>20</sup> Two further British programs, however, were notable for their later resonance with post-9/11 themes and the emergence of Dark Americana. Channel 4’s six-part series *Traffic* (1989) was a precursor to *The Wire* both stylistically in pioneering intermingled story arcs and in pointing to the complexity and ultimate futility of the war on drugs. The show inspired the 2000 Hollywood film of almost the same spelling, *Traffic*, directed by Stephen Soderbergh, and an Emmy-nominated U.S. television miniseries spin-off in 2004. Stephen Gaghan wrote the screenplay for *Traffic*—for which he won an Oscar—and went on to write and direct perhaps the first major film production of the post-9/11 epoch, *Syriana* (2005).

Secondly, ITV’s drama series *Cracker* (1993–1995) about a deeply flawed criminal psychologist, Dr. Eddie FitzGerald, “a drunken excuse for a husband, a lousy father and a gambling washout,”<sup>21</sup> also deserves mention because it defied the police

procedural by identifying the perpetrator early on and then explored the complex motivations for their crimes, which in that sense represented a forerunner to shows like *The Wire* and *Homeland* that adopted a similar narrative technique. Not so much a “whodunit” but a “whydunit” according to *Cracker*’s lead actor, Robbie Coltrane,<sup>22</sup> the format provided a vehicle for the show’s main writer, Liverpool playwright Jimmy McGovern, to offer an uncompromising assessment of the British social scene in the early 1990s. The series dipped midway when by McGovern’s own admission he had “nothing more to write about”<sup>23</sup> and ended in 1996, after a thoughtful one-off special about Britain’s impending handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997. Ten years later, however, *Cracker* returned for a final one-off special that dealt explicitly with the post-9/11 world, including the controversial invasion of Iraq: a powerful and profoundly disturbing story that drew uncomfortable attention to the disjuncture in the U.S. tolerance of terrorism before and after 11 September 2001.<sup>24</sup>

The evolving televisual and cinematic genre on the little and big screens that was increasingly prepared to cross dark, complex, emotional, ethical, and political terrain represents one of the most fascinating movements in recent popular culture. One question that arises, therefore, is how well does contemporary academic inquiry devoted to studying these currents in cultural affairs capture this diversity and complexity? The answer, as we shall discern, is not very well.

### Media Studies, Film, and War

Since the 1980s and the rise of new areas of scholarly inquiry like media, film, and cultural studies, a distinctive academic literature has evolved to assess the relationship between Hollywood, U.S. political culture, and its putative projection of soft power. The appraisal of this relationship is essentially negative. Informed by the fashionable, post-1968, largely European, deconstruction of Western culture that post-structuralists like Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, and Gilles Deleuze, and the Frankfurt school of critical theory associated with Theodor Adorno and Jürgen Habermas,<sup>25</sup> film studies exhibits an inclination toward exposing the relationship between the U.S. film industry, late capitalism, and its manipulation of popular and political culture. In this view, reading movies *contre le grain* in the appropriate Derridean or critical neo-Marxist manner unmasks the concealed ideologies informing Hollywood, particularly in its depiction of war and politics.

For example, Philip John Davies and Paul Wells assert: “the Hollywood-Washington link has rarely been stronger. . . . In the mass mediated era, it is the implied ideological agenda of cinema which still offers significant clues to the popular understanding of socio-cultural identity and political existence.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Beverley Merill Kelley identifies six political ideologies ranging from populism to interventionism informing American movies.<sup>27</sup> Somewhat differently, Michael Coyne contends:

Hollywood has, in effect, functioned as a two-way mirror through which the world views America, while Americans see only themselves. Film-makers have consistently used the movies to consolidate powerful national myths that are instructive to citizens, reflective of individual and societal aspirations, and significantly exported as a glamorized ideology of America for consumption by the rest of the world.<sup>28</sup>

For Coyne: "In American movies ideology is everywhere."<sup>29</sup> Consequently, according to J. David Slocum, "images and narratives of war have been consistent staples of U.S. film production."<sup>30</sup> Here, "filmmaking as a major American industry and cultural institution" has presented "militarization and national security as a recurrent, if shifting, aspect of U.S. social life."<sup>31</sup> "War cinema," he continues, is produced in a manner that associates with "national, imperial, or mythical frameworks. The repetition of these elements breeds crucial familiarity with audiences and guides the marketing and exhibition campaigns of the film industry as social, economic, and cultural institutions."<sup>32</sup>

Chambers and Culbert consider that the cultural function of war cinema can in certain respects naturalize processes of destruction. "Cumulatively," they argue, a "deeper purpose" is served: "making sense of war and its organized, if often random, violence."<sup>33</sup> More precisely, Mark Lacy claims that cinema normalizes "the idea of war as the natural order of things and of shaping society through the active forgetting and production of historical knowledge."<sup>34</sup> Referring specifically to the War on Terror, David Holloway further proclaims that the "Representation of 9/11 as the moment when everything changed" became a new media and "ideological lynchpin."<sup>35</sup>

From the critical perspective, new media and technological developments alter human perception and experience. If cinema naturalizes war through its representation, such mediation replaces reality. Following Jean Baudrillard's claim that the first "Gulf War did not take place,"<sup>36</sup> film theorists and cultural critics declare that there is no experience outside the mediated coverage by the West. In contrast with Edmund Burke's view of the sublime, the critical position asserts in the context of the first and second Gulf wars that: "the reality of representation is substituted for the representation of reality."<sup>37</sup> Thus the very definition of war becomes destabilized as the capacity to comprehend violence and conflict is constructed and altered by mediation.

Is it the case, therefore, that the American film and television industry and its product, the war film, reflects and shapes the prevailing capitalist and imperialist American agenda at home and abroad? And if so, how effectively have the post-9/11 War on Terror movies and TV dramas reflected and promoted U.S. foreign and political goals?

The difficulty here is that, as with much critical and constructivist thinking in the humanities and social sciences, reading all film and media presentations through the critical theory lens tends to assume what it needs to prove. Subscribing to the claim that all Hollywood films serve the interests of a political/military/industrial complex, and are complicit in the growth of militarization and national security,<sup>38</sup> requires cumbersome contortions to force the often-conflicted intentions of filmmakers into an ideologically predetermined, procrustean, bed. Inevitably, critical media theorists come to see what they want to see.

Equally problematically, critical or not, film and media studies treat the Hollywood war film as a distinct genre that shares an elective affinity with the political film with which it frequently overlaps. In this context, it would be logical to infer that the post-9/11 film represents a subgenre within the war/political film category. Yet the idea of a genre, "War," which lumps together all films that deal with twentieth- and twenty-first-century American depictions of internal and external political violence, is immediately questionable. As Jeanine Basinger observed in tracing the changing Hollywood treatment of World War II, "the war film does not exist in a coherent generic form." "Different wars," she argues, "inspire very different genres."<sup>39</sup>

Undoubtedly, World War II reflected and reinforced an idea of just war portrayed in the cinema. However, Hollywood's delayed reaction to the Vietnam War was far more ambivalent. Only one Hollywood movie, John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968), attempted to address the Vietnam War during the years of combat and also to decode "the

MacNamara-Rusk-Rostow interventionist rationale in terms Americans could easily comprehend.”<sup>40</sup> Based on Robin Moore’s 1965 book, the *New York Times* memorably dismissed the film upon its release as:

... so unspeakable, so stupid, so rotten and false in every detail that it passes through being fun, through being funny, through being camp, through everything and becomes an invitation to grieve, not for our soldiers or for Vietnam (the film could not be more false or do a greater disservice to either of them), but for what has happened to the fantasy-making apparatus in this country. Simplicities of the right, simplicities of the left, but this one is beyond the possible. It is vile and insane.<sup>41</sup>

Instead, far more typical of Vietnam War films were those that appeared after the fall of Saigon in 1975, like Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and Francis Ford Coppola’s seminal *Apocalypse Now* (1979), which drew attention to the problem of intervention and the moral ambiguity that the war presented to the American political conscience. In the 1980s, films like Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), and Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), while exploring the warrior ethic and the relationship between individual character and collective purpose, by no means reinforced notions of militarization or the U.S. myth of the crusader nation. Frequently, in fact, these films were the very opposite of this, offering trenchant critiques of U.S. military institutions.

Despite the differences between movies that featured American involvement in twentieth-century warfare from 1914 to 1975, from Kubrick’s *Paths of Glory* (1957) to *The Longest Day* (1962), and into the post-Vietnam era, certain common themes can be identified. All war films feature the idea, as Coyne argued, of the lone man of conscience, “monuments to self-reliance and inner resolve.”<sup>42</sup> They evoke metonymically the American “Wild-West” genre from John Ford’s *The Horse Soldiers* (1960), to Clint Eastwood’s *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), of “Westerners on horseback” dealing with a hostile environment that morally challenges the character and drives the plot.<sup>43</sup>

The Western genre also feeds into the war film topos of America as the crusader nation, its manifest destiny and civilizing mission to bring freedom and modernity via force if necessary. The war film, like the Western, serves a core American myth, with the difference that, as Slocum discerns, individuals are converted into a “cohesive unit,” the melting pot platoon, and “who by choosing to fight against unforgiving odds in a savage land fulfill the nation’s foundation mission of bringing civilization to a wilderness.”<sup>44</sup> Both the war and Western movie traditions play an important role in shaping the historical memory of the past and its place in popular culture. Thus, Robert Rosenstone contended in 2004 that “serious history” with “a capital H” could no longer be trusted and that the cultural historian therefore had to look to multiple approaches to assess past events.<sup>45</sup> This required greater attention to the role the Hollywood war film played in interpreting past experience. Indeed, for Robert Sklar, “the question of historical memory has become the touchstone of the movies’ cultural power.”<sup>46</sup>

The cinematic contextualization, narrative structure, and characterization of the war movie tradition were inevitably going to give way to its own distinctive genre after 9/11. The early twenty-first-century cineaste was always going to find in the big and small screens a suitable instrument for exploring the drama and symbolism evoked by the “War on Terror” and of those revolutionary actors prepared to countenance violence to clarify their preferred worldly utopias.

Writing in the context of the development of the political novel, Richard Rorty argued that it was fictional representation rather than the “philosophical treatise”<sup>47</sup> that encapsulated the sources of contemporary cruelty and suffering, capturing and thus clarifying the “principle vehicles of moral change and progress.”<sup>48</sup> Rorty’s point was that fiction helped illuminate the moral and political options more effectively than the social sciences.<sup>49</sup> Applying Rorty’s understanding to the evolution of Dark Americana on screen, we can ask whether filmmaking after 9/11 has demonstrated the flexibility capable of generating informed perspective into the motive for violence, together with the capacity to salvage a sense of Enlightenment progressive purpose? In other words, what redemptive possibilities do the films depicting the response domestically and internationally to 9/11 allow?

### The 9/11 and Iraq War Filmography

As we have suggested, by the second decade of the twenty-first century it was possible to identify a distinct post-9/11 film category that addressed, in different ways, the politics of counterinsurgency, national security and home grown terrorism, and the ubiquitous threat of polymorphous violence. Newspapers like *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* published lists of the best post-9/11 films on the tenth anniversary of the attacks.<sup>50</sup> On the basis of such generic lists and more recent films in this genre we can begin to assess the moral and political insights they provide and the extent to which the U.S. film and television industry endorses or conceals, as critical media theory maintains, an ideological mission in the shows it produces and exhibits.

The films released from 2005 onward that directly addressed the impact of 9/11, *United 93* and *World Trade Center*, portray, respectively, the responses of passengers on United Flight 93 that crashed in Somerset County, Pennsylvania, at 10:03 on the morning of 11 September 2001, and the cinematic representation of the experience of Port Authority police officers McMahon and Jimenez trapped and then rescued from the North Tower by accountant and marine reservist Dave Karnes. Oliver Stone’s film uses a familiar Hollywood structure of leading characters displaying stoicism in the face of extreme adversity while their wives suffer on the home front. The attack thus becomes a conventional star vehicle for Nicholas Cage, Maggie Gyllenhaal, and others to emote, reducing 9/11 to the status of a formulaic disaster movie.

By contrast, and more interestingly, Paul Greengrass, drawing on his journalistic experience in British current affairs television and his mastery of the “queasycam” (shaky camera) technique, created a pseudo-documentary of United Airlines flight 93. Intercut with the reaction from the National Air Traffic Control Center, airport control towers, and regional air traffic stations the film sought to capture the atmosphere of escalating chaos.<sup>51</sup> The fact that Greengrass eschewed a character-driven narrative and used no recognizable actors enhances the representation. As Roger Ebert noted, “there is no attempt to portray the passengers or terrorists as people with histories. . . . What we know about the passengers on United 93 is exactly what we would know if we had been on the plane and sitting across from them: nothing, except for a few details of personal appearance.”<sup>52</sup>

Significantly, *United 93* avoids treating the hijackers as psychopaths. They are, if anything, normalized by scenes presenting them at prayer, reciting the Koran, and carrying out what they believe to be a divine mission. Like everyone else in the movie they appear unexceptional. The power of *United 93* derives from its depiction of the mundane on an extraordinary day where ordinary people are caught in an inexorable movement toward tragedy. Greengrass’s *cinéma vérité* technique offers a detached and realistic

presentation of events, evoking a Burkean sense of the sublime without recourse to politics or patriotic speeches. Stone's far more engaged but mawkish account of 9/11 concludes very differently with the ex-marine Dave Karnes stating his intention to re-enlist as: "They're gonna need some good men over there to revenge this."

As Karnes's message implies, the subsequent genealogy of 9/11 movies features "over there," primarily Iraq but also Afghanistan, or the more general imbroglia of Middle Eastern politics. From Stephen Gaghan's *Syriana*, Paul Greengrass's subsequent foray into post-9/11 cinema *Green Zone* (2010), to Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper*, film makers draw on the notions of just and dirty war and the crusader nation image to evince the domestic and international political dimensions of U.S. involvement in the Middle East, the elusive nature of the enemy, and the increasingly problematic character of American engagement. As the war goes on, Hollywood's liberal conscience also examines the problem of *jus in bello* constraints like the recourse to torture, rendition, military misconduct, and political deception.

While few of these movies overtly oppose U.S. involvement in the Middle East, Brian De Palma's *Redacted* (2007) being the exception, neither do they clearly endorse the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or the political justifications for fighting them. On the contrary, they often explicitly analyze the moral gray areas, sometimes offering searing appraisals of American foreign policy and security practices. It is difficult, in other words, to see any of these films fulfilling an American ideological mission to bring civilization to savage places. Films like *Syriana* and *Green Zone*, for example, strongly imply that the post-9/11 interventions were largely to do with placating corporate oil interests, while permeating films like *The Kingdom* (2007), *Lions For Lambs* (2007), *Rendition* (2007), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Body of Lies* (2008), *The Valley of Elah* (2008), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), *Green Zone*, and *American Sniper* is a clash of civilizations.

Gaghan's *Syriana*, for instance, self-consciously references the work of explicitly left-wing directors, like Constantin Costa Gavras's *Z* (1969) and *State of Siege* (1973), and Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). The title evokes the notion of a *Pax Americana* by which Gaghan represents U.S. policy as geared toward the reshaping of the Middle East in the interest of oil conglomerates like the fictional Connex Oil Company, one of the shadowy and duplicitous protagonists in the film. Like Gaghan's screenplay for *Traffic*, *Syriana* features multiple and confusing storylines involving corporate greed, a jaded CIA agent, Bob Barnes, and a CIA and Connex Oil-orchestrated plot to assassinate a somewhat unlikely liberal, progressive, Saudi Prince, Nasir, in order to secure the succession of a more pliable Saudi royal. As one of the oil executives cynically reveals, "Corruption is our protection. Corruption is what keeps us safe and warm. Corruption is why you and I are prancing around here. Corruption is how we win." The film's perspective is liberal and Democrat, critical of the Bush administration's links to Saudi oil. For movie critic Peter Bradshaw, though, despite the intricacy of the plot, the film:

conceals a kind of complacent political correctness. It is not a conventional paranoid thriller, because there is nothing to be paranoid about. However tricky the details, the mystery is already solved. The petro-political complex is to blame, but Stephen Gaghan does not care to state it so baldly, perhaps fearful of unsophistication or anti-Americanism or just taking a clear position.<sup>53</sup>

A similar liberal opacity and a wish to expose Pentagon duplicity informs films like Ridley Scott's *Body of Lies*, Robert Redford's *Lions for Lambs*, and *Green Zone*. The

latter again saw Greengrass's mastery of queasycam technique, used in this film to excess. As with other films in the genre, like *The Kingdom*, *Redacted*, *Rendition*, *The Hurt Locker*, and *American Sniper*, the queasycam view deracinates and conveys the audience to a distant land replete with uncertainty and alienated Arab "others" that contrast with the calm domesticity of the home front. This frenzied international mosaic style reinforces what *Village Voice* critic J. Hoberman terms the "Fight Them Over There" motif that informs post-9/11 movies.<sup>54</sup>

*Green Zone* features Matt Damon fresh from Greengrass's highly successful *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007) as Roy Miller, the Bourne-lite chief warrant officer of a Mobile Exploitation Team, searching unsuccessfully in the wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq for Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Miller/Matt Damon, who also featured in *Syriana*, begins to doubt the intelligence he is working with. *Green Zone* offers a formulaic action thriller that, like *The Bourne Ultimatum*, parades the director's well-advertised distrust of authority and what Greengrass views, after initially supporting the war, as the Bush and Blair governments' deceit about the justification for intervention in Iraq.<sup>55</sup>

The plot hinges on the Bush administration's duplicity over WMD, and entails the hunt for a former Ba'athist General, Al Rawli, who could compromise the Pentagon's agenda. The film also discloses the complicity of the Western media in accepting the official line represented in the character of Lawrie Dayne, a fetching but naïve *Wall Street Journal* hack. Miller plays the lone ranger exported to the Iraq desert searching for the truth about WMD and the justification for war. In discussing issues with yet another jaded old CIA hand, Miller innocently remarks, "I thought we were all on the same side." "Don't be so naïve," he is told. As with *Syriana*, corruption undermines the honest endeavor of Miller and his team. As he tells the calculating Pentagon official, Poundstone, "We went to war under false premises."

Brian De Palma's *Redacted*, more than any other 9/11 film, takes the corruption and false premises at the heart of the Iraq war campaign to expose the *in bello* crimes perpetrated by soldiers from Alfa Company manning a checkpoint in Samarra, Iraq. *Redacted* serves as a metaphor for what De Palma conceives to be "the fatal flaw of our Iraq strategy: You cannot enforce 'freedom' at gunpoint."<sup>56</sup> Such faulty war aims lead to moral failure in the pacification of the Sunni and Shi'ite insurgencies between 2003 and 2006. Based on the case of the rape of a young Iraqi girl and the murder of an Iraqi family in Mahmudiyah by U.S. soldiers in 2006,<sup>57</sup> De Palma uses the incident to expose the political and moral failings of counterinsurgent warfare.

De Palma deploys his trademark technical virtuosity in using both queasycam (the film is initially shot through the camcorder of Angel Salazar, a private aspiring to film school, making a video diary of his tour), newsreel footage, a French documentary team recording events in Samarra, online blogs, and Al Qaeda video footage posted on YouTube, to capture the alienation of a demoralized U.S. unit and the "nausea, fear and hopelessness of the Iraq war in its long end game."<sup>58</sup> Thus, the two protagonists of the rape and murder, soldiers B.B. Rush and Reno Flake, experience "no remorse" for their actions. Instead, they view Iraq as "a shithole . . . a fucking deathtrap" and express the desire "to vaporize every sand nigger," a sentiment exacerbated by the kidnapping and subsequent beheading of Salazar revealed via a graphic Al Qaeda in Iraq-style video. Back home, McCoy, the soldier with a conscience, asks rhetorically, "what was I doing there, in a country that did nothing to us?"

Similar doubts about the justice of the cause or the purpose of the counterinsurgency permeate those films that, contra De Palma, support the integrity of the American military

fighting an amorphous enemy. Accordingly, both *The Hurt Locker* and *American Sniper* contrast domestic tranquility with the anarchy and alienation of Iraq. The mission to defend the U.S. homeland and the suburban Texan homestead particularly contrasts with the shattered streets of Fallujah and Sadr city.

However, rather than demoralization, these films focus on the heroic commitment of U.S. servicemen to their mission. Iraq might be a “shithole,” but Navy SEAL, Chris Kyle—the *American Sniper* responsible for more than 160 kills—considers his mission to protect his comrades and his homeland. Based on Kyle’s autobiography,<sup>59</sup> which expressed scant regard for Iraqis (whom he considered “savages”), the film traces Kyle’s patriotic desire to fight them “over there” after the events of 9/11.<sup>60</sup>

Clint Eastwood conceived the film as a testament to the heroism of the American soldier and his commitment to his comrades. Consequently, there is no examination of the war’s motives and Kyle has little doubt about the integrity of his role as a killing machine, a role that earns him the soubriquet “The Legend.” Questioned by a psychiatrist about whether he has any qualms about his actions over four tours, Kyle replies: “The only thing that haunts me is the guys I couldn’t save.” Ultimately, Iraq provides the background scenery for disporting U.S. values in their confrontation with evil in the shape of Al Qaeda in Iraq or the Shi’ite militias in Sadr City on Kyle’s fourth tour.

The Eastwood film, somewhat predictably, follows the blueprint of the Sergio Leone “Spaghetti Western” where the enigmatic lone gunman takes out the bad guys against a lawless desert backdrop. Kyle even pursues the mysterious Mustafa, a former Syrian Olympic marksman, down to a final shootout. Reducing Iraq to Hollywood stereotypes leads not only to a caricature of the war but also of the protagonists. Over the course of Kyle’s sniping confrontations, Mustafa snipes both for the Sunni insurgents in Fallujah and, after 2005, for the Shi’ite Mahdi army in Basra. Such a shift of allegiances by a committed Sunni *jihadi* seems at best unlikely, at worst a distortion of the conflict to suit the rigid demands of a Hollywood formula.

Patriotic commitment alone determines Sergeant William James’s mission leading an Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) unit in Iraq in Kathryn Bigelow’s award-winning *The Hurt Locker*. James defuses bombs with a blithe disregard for both his and his unit’s safety. He demonstrates an attention to detail under intense pressure worthy of a great athlete or a great psychopath, or both. Given his indifference to danger it is surprising that the rest of his unit or his commanders and his psychologist tolerate his conduct. James does not think about it. “Every time you go out there, it’s life or death,” he avers. “You roll the dice.” His colleague, Sanborn, who wants to breed rather than die, tells James, “I fucking hate this place.” He does not want to “bleed out in the sand. Nobody will give a shit.” Unlike James, who evidently finds suburban U.S. domesticity less than blissful, Sanborn does not return for a second tour. In order to keep the action going James and his unit confront Sunni insurgents in the desert and display sniping skills not usually found in EOD units. Engaging in a variety of reckless actions no doubt makes for box office appeal but at the expense of the verisimilitude Bigelow otherwise wants to achieve.

Thus, in *The Hurt Locker*, *Green Zone*, and *American Sniper* we witness an American working-class hero doing the right thing in difficult circumstances, but let down either by those higher up the chain of command or by Washington high politics. Implausibly, despite their lack of seniority, James, Miller, and Kyle all ignore orders to engage the insurgents without proper support. No doubt this enhances the drama, but no military chain of command would permit such undisciplined behavior. After all as Kyle’s wife informs him, “It’s pretty egotistical to think you can protect us all.”

### Screening Paranoia: Depicting the World of Intelligence After 9/11

Contrastingly, while sharing some affinities with the Iraq War movies, are films and TV series that deal with intelligence failure and paranoia about precisely who, or what, constitutes “the enemy.” *The Kingdom*, *Body of Lies*, *Rendition*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Homeland*, and *A Most Wanted Man* engage with problems of technological surveillance and the murky world of torture and human intelligence. This subgenre follows the television and film convention of the crime/spy thriller drama. One critic termed *The Kingdom* “CSI: Riyadh,”<sup>61</sup> while *Rendition*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Body of Lies*, and *A Most Wanted Man* adopt the well-established formula of the “mystery solved—case closed” procedural.

Consequently, in Peter Berg’s *The Kingdom*, a team led by special agent Fleury (Jamie Foxx) track down the Al Qaeda–linked *ihadis* who blow up a U.S. compound in Riyadh. Mission accomplished, America avenged; they go home. In the process they succeed, despite the mayhem they create in entering a “very bad neighborhood,” in forging good relations with the local honest cop. As Fleury, explains, “America is not perfect, but we are good at this. Let us help you.”

Similarly, Ridley Scott’s *Body of Lies*, although set in the age of *ihad*, develops into a standard espionage thriller, with complicated story lines and Middle Eastern and European locations to obscure a conventional plot to catch the dangerous *ihadist*, al-Saleem. Middle Eastern CIA expert Roger Ferris works with the suave chief of Jordanian security Hani Pasha to concoct a plot to expose the shadowy *ihadist emir* responsible for a series of European bomb attacks. Meanwhile, back at Langley, “Control,” in the shape of red-neck patriot Ed Hoffman, watches everything through high-powered surveillance. Based on David Ignatius’s novel, the all too familiar thriller conceit undermines a film that is ultimately slick, shallow, and simplistic, but not entirely unsympathetic to the difficulties of Middle Eastern politics.<sup>62</sup> Hani Pasha emerges as the most attractive character, especially in comparison with the churlish Hoffman. “Don’t lie to me,” Hani tells Ferris repeatedly with little effect, as duplicity is all-pervasive.

*Body of Lies* tackles the issue of technological surveillance versus human intelligence without touching more troubling questions for the liberal conscience like the use of extraordinary rendition, black sites, and torture to extract information from suspects. This is not the case with Gavin Hood’s *Rendition*, the first Hollywood film to address directly the CIA’s practice of extraordinary rendition. Loosely based on the experience of Khalid el-Masiri, whom the CIA mistook for a radical *ihadist*, the film explores the rendition and torture of a Chicago-based, New York University–educated, scientist Anwar el-Ibrahimi as a result of cell phone intercepts that link him to a radical group responsible for a suicide attack in an unnamed North African country in which a CIA agent is killed. The target of the attack is the brutal chief of police, Abbas Fawal, who then receives the suspect, Anwar, into his tender care. Idealistic young CIA agent, Douglas Freeman, observes the enhanced interrogation techniques. “This is my first torture,” he informs Fawal. “This is how it works,” he is told. “You worry about getting the information and I tell you about whether the information works. You focus on the job.”

Back in the United States, CIA dragon lady Corinne Whitman denies torture but equivocally defends the practice of seizing and transferring “witnesses” to secret prisons on the grounds that it saves lives. Anwar’s wife tries to find out what is happening but gets nowhere in the face of an impenetrable establishment. The film’s graphic portrayal of torture supports the liberal view that it is unconstitutional, discredited the Bush administration, and ultimately fails. Freeman quotes somewhat portentously from Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, “I fear you speak upon the rack, where men enforced do

speak anything.” As Gavin Hood, via the character of Freeman maintains, “you torture one person you create, ten, a hundred, a thousand new enemies.”

*Rendition*’s critical approach to the effectiveness of surveillance and torture contrasts dramatically with Kathryn Bigelow’s *Zero Dark Thirty*, which takes a far more ambivalent attitude to the use of enhanced interrogation on CIA black sites to extract information that eventually leads to the Navy SEAL raid in May 2011 that executed bin Laden. Once more, deploying the pseudo-documentary approach that Greengrass pioneered in *United 93*, and which Bigelow and her script writer Mark Boal followed in *The Hurt Locker*, the film claimed to be “based on first hand accounts of actual events.”<sup>63</sup> While drawing on actual events like the use of black sites, the bombing of the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad in 2008, the bombing of Camp Chapman outside the Afghan city of Khost on 30 December 2009 that resulted in the deaths of CIA agent Jennifer Matthews and six other intelligence officials, the removal of the CIA station chief in Islamabad in 2010, and, of course, the Navy SEAL raid of 2011, which takes up the last quarter of the movie, the film also bends and distorts events and actions to meet the demands of the crime procedural genre.

The film focuses on Maya, a young agent who joins the CIA after 9/11, and pursues bin Laden single-mindedly for the next decade. “If you want to protect the homeland,” she declares, “you got to get bin Laden.” The hotel bombing in Islamabad, which she survives, reinforces her obsession. She comments, “I was spared so I could finish the job.” The film follows Maya’s pursuit from the torture of Al Qaeda suspect Ammar al-Baluchi at a CIA black site in 2003 to the identification of Abu Ahmed, a courier for bin Laden, the ensuing tapping of his cell phone via magic box surveillance, and the identification and execution of bin Laden at his compound in Abbottabad.

Bigelow’s film caused controversy for its open acknowledgment that torture got results. As her fellow interrogator Dan informs Ammar after a particularly brutal session, “in the end everybody breaks bro, it’s biology.” In Bigelow’s treatment there is no disavowal of torture. After Obama bans enhanced interrogation in 2009, the CIA merely alters its methods. What is required, as Islamabad station chief, Joseph Bradley (a character based on the actual station chief Jonathan Banks)<sup>64</sup> informs his team in 2009 is “actionable intelligence.” When a colleague replies, in the manner of Donald Rumsfeld, “We don’t know, what we don’t know,” he receives the curt rejoinder, “what the fuck does that mean?”

Significantly, both former CIA and Pentagon officials as well as the American liberal commentariat have criticized the film for mixing fact and fiction. Thus, Steve Coll argued in *The New York Review of Books* that Bigelow problematically aligns her “methods with journalists and historians, but presents as drama a still undigested national tragedy.”<sup>65</sup> From a different perspective, former CIA veteran and promulgator of the program for enhanced interrogation after 9/11, Jose A. Rodriguez, considered that the film exaggerated the brutality of enhanced interrogation techniques and “inaccurately links torture with intelligence success.” He maintained teamwork, rather than the determination of a single-minded loner, and a “mixture of intelligence capabilities” led to the capture and killing of bin Laden.<sup>66</sup> Summating these criticisms, Graham Allison, a former assistant secretary of Defense, claimed that the film overstated the utility of enhanced interrogation, understated the role of the Obama administration, and criticized the deceptive portrayal of an effort driven by a lone female fighting the CIA system.<sup>67</sup>

The lone female operative bucking the bureaucratic, male-dominated, intelligence system also constitutes a central theme in the long-running *Homeland* series. Howard Gordon, chief writer and executive producer of political thriller series *24* (2001–2010) adapted *Homeland* from an Israeli TV series, *Hatufim*. In season 1, bipolar agent Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes) pursues a threat to homeland security

in the shape of returned marine hero and former Al Qaeda in Iraq hostage, Nick Brody (Damien Lewis).

The first season captures the sense of impending terror that gripped U.S. homeland security after 9/11. Everyone has reason to feel terror, including Nick's wife, Jessica (Morena Baccarin), who took up with her husband's buddy in Nick's absence, but most especially Carrie Mathison, who ten months after hearing a rumor from one of her contacts in Iraq that an American prisoner of war has been turned, learns that an Army Delta Force team in Afghanistan has found United States Marine Corps sergeant Nicholas Brody, believed killed in Iraq eight years earlier.

While the rest of the CIA and the political establishment believe Brody a war hero, and the vice president recruits him to run for office, Carrie worries that Al Qaeda chief Abu Nazir has recruited him. Illegal audio and video surveillance of Brody's home reveal that he not only has unresolved personal issues but also has not been entirely truthful about his captivity. Indeed, rather bizarrely, Brody converted to Islam during his brutal imprisonment and prays daily in his garage in private. Much of the drama relies on flashbacks. They reveal Brody violently assaulting his fellow marine, Tom Walker, under Abu Nazir's instruction. They also show that Nazir took Brody out of captivity to teach English to his son, Issa.

Even more curiously, in a variant of the Stockholm syndrome, Brody comes to adore the boy and when an unauthorized U.S. drone attack kills Issa, Brody vows revenge on his own country. Nazir and his underground cell in the United States exploit this transformation to return Brody to the homeland to assassinate the president. The plot is additionally complicated by the fact that Tom Walker has not died as a result of Brody's assault, but also has been turned and returns home undercover to conduct lone wolf attacks in Washington. The season concludes with Brody failing to detonate a bomb vest and Nazir instructing Brody to kill Walker. Meanwhile, an increasingly deranged Carrie undergoes electric shock treatment. The improbable plot becomes even more labyrinthine in seasons 2 and 3, and culminates in season 4 with Carrie as station chief in Islamabad addressing the problems raised by the U.S. troop draw down in Afghanistan. Anxious to keep the series up to date with the War on Terror, the producers somehow missed the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Despite this, President Obama is a fan.<sup>68</sup>

Notwithstanding its plot limitations, *Homeland* nevertheless captures a United States that is increasingly uncertain and ill at ease with itself, both in foreign policy and the domestic realm. The show depicts the CIA and the political establishment embroiled in calculations about power and avoiding anything that looks like principle. Treachery is ubiquitous. There are, it seems, "no heroes" in *Homeland* and everyone acts from concealed, often obscure, motives.<sup>69</sup> Damien Lewis boasted that the series avoided any "lazy, easy parallels drawn between violence and Islam."<sup>70</sup> In some respects, that is true. *Homeland* could be said to present the forerunners of ISIL in the enigmatic character of Abu Nazir, in a sympathetic, if Machiavellian, light.

In fact, the Machiavellian doctrine of the "lesser evil" and the political necessity of appearing moral rather than acting ethically pervades *Homeland* and other examples of Dark Americana like the political series *House of Cards*. These shows assume, like the Florentine, that "men are so simple, and so subject to present necessities, that he who seeks to deceive will always find someone who will allow himself to be deceived."<sup>71</sup>

## Let Them Run

The amoral world of reason of state, power, and duplicity informing both foreign and domestic politics that TV series like *Homeland* and movies such as *Zero Dark Thirty*,

*Body of Lies*, or *Rendition* illustrate, invites comparison with the Cold War world of espionage, treachery, and betrayal. We have already noted how Dark Americana has some of its origins in the work of novelists like John le Carré, who along with other British authors like Graham Greene and Len Deighton, best capture this world in their writings. Probably the most compelling insight into the dark new American world of equivocation, double dealing and ends justifying means is *A Most Wanted Man* (2014), the film of le Carré's 2008 novel that examines the problem of terror in the West and how to address the problem of *ihadism* at home.<sup>72</sup>

The novel is set in Hamburg, which was home to the 9/11 hijackers. Anton Corbijn's film adaptation finds Chechen immigrant Issa Karpov (Grigoriy Dobrygin) at large in the city, where he becomes a pawn in a power struggle between bankers, lawyers, suspected terrorists, and German, British, and American intelligence agencies. Günther Bachmann (Philip Seymour Hoffman), an "explosive mongrel of a man"<sup>73</sup> directing the Foreign Acquisitions Unit of Germany's fragmented "espionage,"<sup>74</sup> wants to use the suspected *ihadist* as bait to trap suspected Al Qaeda financier, Dr Faisal Abdullah, an influential, naturalized German Muslim. Bachmann, in classic Smiley mode, intends to turn him and run him. Martha Sullivan (Robin Wright)—an overbearing Corinne Whitman-style CIA agent—who oversees German intelligence in the wake of 9/11, initially agrees to bide her time while Annabel Richter (Rachel McAdams), the impressionable human rights lawyer is compromised by her affection for Issa and her questionable relationship with British banker Thomas Brue (Willem Dafoe) who handles the Lipizzaner bonds that the troubled and tortured Issa has inherited.

Bachmann traipses through a moral no-man's land, providing the film's downbeat, distrusting, dishevelled tone. Paranoid mistrust prevails. It concerns degrees of allegiance to a notorious cause and whether having half a foot in the enemy's camp are grounds to have the whole leg amputated. Le Carré's novel criticized the American government's policy of extraordinary rendition, advancing instead the politically calculated efforts of the German unit's operatives as more humane and strategically effective. It is Bachmann who has to explain the pointlessness of biting off one small hydra-head in the shape of Dr. Abdullah rather than exploiting the compromised ideologies of Islamist sympathizers to dig right into the extremist mother lode. Sullivan has other ideas and the film ends with Abdullah seized by the CIA and rendered to a black site for a stint of enhanced interrogation.

The strength of the film, in comparison with others in the post-9/11 espionage thriller genre, is that it dramatizes a critical intelligence dilemma that writers like le Carré and Greene explored in their skeptical treatment of Cold War morality and politics, and which exposes far more effectively than films like *Rendition* or *Zero Dark Thirty* the disutility of torture, when it is possible to more effectively exploit the moral weaknesses in Al Qaeda-linked suspects: to spy on the them, to infiltrate them, and to undermine the movement from the inside. In other words, to forego short-term tactical gains by letting agents and informers "run" and lead to a much greater gains over the longer term. As Bachmann's potent, if ultimately futile, internal monologue retails:

We are not policemen, we are spies. We do not arrest our targets. We develop them and redirect them at bigger targets. When we identify a network, we watch it, we listen to it, we penetrate it and by degrees we control it. Arrests are of negative value. They destroy a precious acquisition. They send you scabbling back to the drawing board, looking for another network half as good as the one you've just screwed up.<sup>75</sup>

### Capturing Reality or Reinforcing Stereotypes?

The film and television productions after 9/11 explore themes of individual moral choice, treachery, betrayal, duplicity, and political distrust. It therefore leaves us with a wide range of interpretive responses to the *jihadi* threat to the West. At one level the tone is downbeat, as these creative dramas can engender a mood of ambivalence, guilt, and possibly even despair. The most pessimistic reading might be that the West has irrevocably compromised itself in the war against *jihadism* and that, in Rorty's words, it has ideologically "exhausted its strength" before it could realize its secular ideals.<sup>76</sup> By contrast, only the committed activist, like Abu Nazir in *Homeland* or the quietly determined *jihadists* in *United 93*, intent on destroying this secular Western order possess the will and ideological purpose for decisive action. What reflections upon the contemporary political condition might we therefore discern from these productions?

In assessing post-9/11 filmography, we can discriminate between those productions that wrestle with the domestic impact of 9/11 and those that deal with the strategic decision after 9/11 "to fight them over there." We can also find in the Hollywood perspective on 9/11 three distinct genre conventions: (1) the espionage, crime procedural thriller (*Rendition*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Homeland*); (2) the war as a version of the Western, with the man of conscience in a humvee rather than on a horse, taking the fight to savages in a savage land (*American Sniper*, *The Hurt Locker*); and (3) the pseudo-documentary style favored by those like Paul Greengrass and Brian De Palma (*United 93*, *Green Zone*, *Redacted*).

Significantly, the ideological projection of U.S. soft power and the promotion of U.S. foreign policy that film and media studies assumes to operate in Hollywood is hard to sustain given that the studios have produced more films broadly critical of U.S. policy in Iraq than supportive of the intervention. Even the more patriotic efforts of directors like Bigelow and Eastwood celebrate the conduct of the U.S. servicemen and women rather than the policy objectives of an often cynical and out of touch administration. There is little here to supportive of the film studies orthodoxy that Hollywood movies after 9/11 reinforce the prevailing capitalist and imperialist agenda. The position adopted by directors like Greengrass, Gagan, Hood, or Scott, or the writers of *Homeland*, is "liberal fence sitting." They criticize the political establishment but applaud American values as represented by the lone individual bucking the flawed system.

Nor do these films naturalize violence as some critical theorists allege. The prevalence of queasycam cinematography in films like *Green Zone*, *Redacted*, *Hurt Locker*, and *American Sniper* portray conflict vertiginously, not naturalistically, while the torture porn in *Rendition* hardly makes a convincing case for enhanced interrogation. Moreover, if a few films somewhat ambivalently do make a case for torture, as in *Zero Dark Thirty*, the case is overstated.

Nor has, as the more deconstructively inclined media theorists contend, the representation of violent reality in the dramatic depiction of the Iraq war and the War on Terror adequately replaced or "mediated" the reality of violence. Whether in Baghdad, London, Madrid, or New York epic drama about war rarely captures the experience of terror. Indeed, the Iraq war movie genre only proves the point made by Edmund Burke in 1753 that if you chose:

a day on which to represent the most sublime and affecting tragedy we have; appoint the most favourite actors; spare no cost upon the scenes and

decorations; unite the greatest efforts of poetry, painting and music; and when you have collected your audience, just at the moment when their minds are erect with expectation, let it be reported that a state criminal of high rank is on the point of being executed in the adjoining square; in a moment the emptiness of the theatre would demonstrate the comparative weakness of the imitative arts, and proclaim the triumph of the real sympathy.<sup>77</sup>

As Burke recognized, “this notion of our having a simple pain in the reality, yet a delight in the representation,” arises from the fact, “that we do not sufficiently distinguish what we would by no means chuse [*sic*] to do, from what we should be eager enough to see if it was once done.” Human nature is so perverse that we “delight in seeing things, which so far from doing, our heartiest wishes would be to see redressed.”<sup>78</sup> As Burke further elaborated:

This noble capital, the pride of England and of Europe, I believe no man is so strangely wicked as to desire to see destroyed by a conflagration or an earthquake, though he should be removed himself to the greatest distance from the danger. But suppose such a fatal accident to have happened, what numbers from all parts would crowd [*sic*] to behold the ruins, and amongst them many who would have been content never to have seen London in its glory?<sup>79</sup>

The great dramatists of war and violence, from Aeschylus to Shakespeare, addressed the moral and political challenges presented in the fog of war but, recognizing the power of sublime violence, never attempted to represent it. When Hollywood does, it fails. As Camilla Long perceived of Eastwood’s *American Sniper*, the attempt to represent Iraq as epic and heroic “could polish off the war epic forever. Kill it dead. Make it an ex-genre.”<sup>80</sup>

The resort to distinctive Hollywood conventions in the thriller/Western/war genre only reinforces these representational deficiencies. The predilection in productions like *Syriana*, *Body of Lies*, *Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *American Sniper*, *Green Zone*, or *Homeland* for the often troubled but determined man or woman of conscience to do the right thing in difficult circumstances in a hostile environment is an enduring Hollywood motif and offers a predictable vehicle for stars as various as George Clooney, Leonardo DiCaprio, Bradley Cooper, Jessica Chastain, or Claire Danes to disport their commitment to American values. Moreover, although some elements of the crusader nation ideal remains in these efforts, it is clear that in the Iraq war movie genre that the idea of bringing freedom and modernization to the barbarians has been largely abandoned. Intriguingly, in more scathing movies like *Rendition*, *Body of Lies*, and *Redacted*, the morally ambiguous dark side of U.S. conduct is more clearly recognized, as it is not clear who the barbarians really are.

At the same time as Hollywood’s treatment of the war is ambivalent, its approach to the political is analogously conflicted. Whether in films that confront the motivation for war and its conduct or those that address the machinations of the administration or the intelligence services there is little virtue exhibited by the Washington establishment. Washington is more Borgia than Bush in the depiction of agency or administration infighting, while the recourse to *jihadism* is generally presented in the one-dimensional terms of zealotry.

## Conclusion: Working in the Moral Shadows

Inevitably, the 9/11 epoch presents us with a divergent range of visual reactions on-screen. There certainly can be found a continuation of the predictable, banal, hero-based procedural. In this respect, it was, rather ironically, Oliver Stone—that most radical and iconoclastic of directors—who with *World Trade Center* managed to contrive the most sentimentalized and clichéd filmic representation of the 9/11 era. Conversely, there is plenty of evidence in 9/11 films that challenges the idea that Hollywood has merely upheld and reinforced notions of a U.S. imperium. Presumably, one imagines that politically conscious directors like Paul Greengrass, Brian De Palma, and Anton Corbijn are likely to be fully aware of the media theory critique of traditional Hollywood conventions and by and large try to steer clear of replicating them in their films.

Imperfect though they may be, many of these productions do question and evaluate the legitimacy of U.S. responses to the so-called War on Terror. Many of them recognize the gray area morality this era has engendered. They have been prepared to interrogate the dilemmas that “working on the dark side” has necessitated, while reflecting more broadly on what this says about the current condition of the American soul. Sufficiently distinct is this approach that we have suggested that it can be described as “Dark Americana”: the evolution of a genre that contests, if not all, at least some, constituting national myths, which Hollywood stereotypes formerly sustained.

The redemptive possibilities offered by the genre of Dark Americana therefore may not be many in number but there are some. If the undeviating ideological fervor of a character like Abu Nazir in *Homeland* can be juxtaposed against the more uncertain, deracinated, commitment of U.S. national will portrayed in many post-9/11 movies, then at the very least one can acknowledge the innate strength of a society that is equipped to scrutinize, sometimes unsparingly, its values and conduct through very public mediums like film and television. Further, that these dramatizations often acknowledge the existence of a “dark side,” and the ethical ambiguity of political life more generally, suggests one or two other interesting redeeming themes.

Accepting the reality of the dark side means that perhaps one can work more effectively in the moral shadows. Maybe it is, as a film like *A Most Wanted Man* intimates, possible to negotiate complex, difficult, ethical terrain and still exploit the moral weaknesses in the enemy without resorting to the dubious practices of torture and rendition. The attempt at maintaining a degree of personal virtue in a world of contingency is, then, one of the most powerful messages that might be detected in some of the best examples of the genre. *The Wire*, identified earlier as illustrative of Dark Americana, bleak and remorseless though it is, also implied that the social realities of moral compromise, intrigue, treachery, and deceit can be offset by occasional small victories: the elevation of a principled police officer or judge; the return to family of an estranged junkie; a more thoughtful, business-orientated, drugs kingpin turning against his gangster master; the recognition of the importance of parenthood; the final realization of a corner pusher that the “game is rigged.” As one of the lead actors, Dominic West, stated on the DVD commentary to *The Wire*, the underlying premise of the series was that “you might not be able to change the system, but you can change yourself.” And in changing yourself maybe in a small way you can change the system, and perhaps even alter the course of history for the better, as the real life passengers of United 93 demonstrated.

## Notes

1. Martin Amis, “Fear and Loathing,” *The Guardian*, 11 September 2001.
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3. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origins of Ideas and the Sublime* (London: J. Dodsley, 1757). p. 76.
4. Wheeler Winston Dixon, "Introduction: Something Lost—Film after 9/11," in Wheeler Winston Dixon, ed., *Film and Television After 9/11* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), p. 3.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
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