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Narrating Violence in Post-9/11 Action Cinema

Terrorist Narratives, Cinematic Narration, and Referentiality

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VS RESEARCH

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With a foreword by Prof. Dr. Winfried Fluck

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Geleitwort

Die Anschläge auf das World Trade Center am 11. September 2001 haben die amerikanische Gesellschaft und Kultur verändert und stellen deren Analyse vor neue interpretatorische Herausforderungen. Dabei ist die eindringliche visuelle Dimension des Ereignisses immer wieder zu einem Bezugspunkt geworden, weil sie bedrückende Parallelen zu den Katastrophenszenarios des Hollywoodfilms aufwies. Die überraschende Parallele verdeutlicht die zentrale Rolle, die Medien und populäre Kultur für unsere Wahrnehmung und Interpretation von terroristischer Gewalt spielen. Die vorliegende Arbeit nimmt diese Beobachtung zum Ausgangspunkt, weitet sie jedoch auf die Zeit nach dem 11. September aus und fragt nach kulturellen Antworten auf den 9/11-Schock: Wie wird terroristische Gewalt in amerikanischen Filmen nach 9/11 dargestellt? Haben die Ereignisse des 11. September dazu geführt, neue, weniger sensationalistische und voyeuristische, Formen der Gewaltdarstellung zu entwickeln? Für die Verfasserin ist dies nicht nur eine wichtige film- und kulturwissenschaftliche Fragestellung. Sie hat für ihre Analyse Filme ausgewählt, die, wenn auch mit den Mitteln des Genrekinos, die weitergehende Frage stellen, ob und wann Gewalt und Gegengewalt, einschließlich der Folter, legitim sein können. In einer in kulturwissenschaftlichen Arbeiten selten zu findenden Erweiterung der Fragestellung bezieht sie daher aus der politischen Philosophie den Ansatz der Just War Theory in ihre Analysen mit ein, in dem es um Fragen nach der Motivierung und Rechtfertigung von Gewalt geht.

Die besondere Leistung dieser Arbeit besteht jedoch nicht nur in dieser philosophischen Ausweitung, sondern in der gelungenen Verbindung von grundlegenden Debatten über die ethische Dimension von Gewalt mit detaillierten Interpretationen der narrativen und visuellen Strategien, mit denen Spielfilme unsere Wahrnehmung und damit auch unsere kulturellen Haltungen zum Thema lenken. Eine der Grundannahmen der Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft, dass sich Ideologie in fiktionalen Texten und ästhetischen Objekten am effektivsten in der Form (und nicht auf der Inhaltsebene) manifestiert, wird hier in überzeugender Weise konkretisiert. Fragen nach der Funktion und Legitimation von Gewalt können nicht allein durch einen Bezug auf die Ebene visueller Darstellung beantwortet werden. Sie müssen in dem erzählerischen Gesamtzusammenhang gesehen werden, in den die Gewaltdarstellung jeweils eingebunden ist. Der Titel dieser Arbeit – Narrating Violence – ist daher wörtlich zu nehmen: Im Spielfilm und anderen fiktionalen Darstellungen wird die Bedeutung von Gewaltdarstel-

lungen wesentlich durch ästhetische Wirkungsstrategien geschaffen, die uns zumeist unmerklich leiten und als Zuschauer positionieren. Mit ihrem Titel bezieht sich die Verfasserin auf das gesamte Bündel von erzählerischen Perspektiven, Positionierungen des Betrachters, Sympathielenkung, Schnittfolge, Bildkomposition und Handlungsstrukturen, durch die ein Film erst seine volle Wirksamkeit erreicht. Dabei erweist sich insbesondere der erzähltechnische Begriff der Fokalisierung als wichtig, denn er erlaubt es der Verfasserin, Elemente filmischer Sympathielenkung herauszuarbeiten, die weit über unscharfe Identifikationstheorien hinausgehen. Auf diese Weise gelingt es, die komplexen, oft ambivalenten Gefühle der Zuschauer gegenüber Attentätern und Opfern zu beschreiben und jene Strategien herauszuarbeiten, die beim Zuschauer zu emotionaler Distanz und Selbstreflexion führen sollen. Insgesamt kann gesagt werden, dass es hier in einer seltenen Verbindung von zwei scheinbar weit auseinander liegenden Interpretationsansätzen – der philosophischen Frage nach der Legitimität von Gewalt und textnahen Analysen filmischer Wirkungs- und Legitimationsstrategien – gelungen ist, ein exemplarisches Modell kultureller Analyse vorzulegen, das über das Thema der Arbeit hinausweist.

Um ihr Ziel einer vertieften, textnahen Interpretation überzeugend umsetzen zu können, hat sich die Verfasserin in ihrer Analyse auf einen kleinen Kreis von Filmen beschränkt. Anstelle eines pauschalen Überblicks über filmische Gewaltdarstellungen in der Zeit nach dem 11. September konzentriert sie sich auf drei Filmbeispiele, die zugleich für drei verschiedene Möglichkeiten kommerzieller Filmproduktion stehen – vom effektsicheren Blockbuster bis zur ästhetisch ambitionierten Independent Production: James McTeigues *V for Vendetta* (2005), die Verfilmung des gleichnamigen Comics von Alan Moore und David Lloyd nach einem Drehbuch der Wachowski Brüder, in dem sich Freiheitskampf und persönliche Rachemotive vermengen; Steven Spielbergs Film *Munich* (2005) über ein Todeskommando des israelischen Geheimdienstes, das die Geiselnahme bei den Olympischen Spielen in München rächen soll; und Alfonso Cuarons *Children of Men* (2006), ein Science Fiction Film über das drohende Ende der Menschheit, das zu Chaos und anarchischer Gewalt führt. In allen drei Filmen steht terroristische Gewalt im Mittelpunkt, an alle drei Filme wird die Frage gestellt, welche Erklärungen und Begründungen für terroristische Akte jeweils gegeben werden. In allen drei Filmen steht mit der angeschnittenen Thematik zugleich die Angemessenheit der amerikanischen Reaktion auf die Ereignisse des 11. September zur Debatte – wobei Terrorattacken und die Antwort darauf nicht selten durch visuelle und narrative Parallelen in Bezug zueinander gesetzt werden. Alle drei Filme setzen sich zudem, wenn auch auf je unterschiedliche Weise, mit dem Vorwurf auseinander, dass die filmische Darstellung von Gewalt unserer Schaulust Nahrung gibt und somit paradoxerweise ästhetisches

Vergnügen bereiten kann. Aber für alle drei Filme gilt gleichermaßen, dass sie sich von dieser stillschweigenden Komplizenschaft zu distanzieren versuchen. Daraus ergibt sich als zentrale Frage an die Filme, in welcher Weise und mit welchen filmischen Strategien jeweils auf die Gefahr einer ästhetischen Legitimierung von Gewalt reagiert wird und welche Versuche gemacht werden, neue Formen für die Darstellung von Gewalt zu entwickeln.

In ihrer selten zu findenden Balance zwischen politischer Theorie und der detaillierten Interpretation ästhetischer Wirkungsstrategien kann die vorliegende Arbeit für Film- und Medienwissenschaftler, Kulturwissenschaftler, Amerikanisten und politische Philosophen gleichermaßen von Interesse sein – nicht nur in ihrer Auseinandersetzung mit der Frage der Legitimierung von Gewalt, sondern auch als eine wissenschaftliche Arbeit, die uns die unauflösliche Verzahnung von Politik und Ästhetik eindrücklich vor Augen führt.

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Deutsche Zusammenfassung

In meiner Magisterarbeit untersuche ich drei zeitgenössische Spielfilme - *V for Vendetta, Munich* und *Children of Men* - in Hinblick auf ihre Gewalterzählung. Ausgangspunkt der Arbeit ist die Überlegung, daß sich die grundsätzliche moralische und künstlerische Problematik in der Darstellung von Gewalt im Film im Falle von 9/11 noch verschärft. Zum einen wurde das Medium Film beschuldigt, insbesondere der spektakuläre Actionfilm, die virtuelle Vorlage für die Terrorattacken geliefert zu haben: Die Kollision der Flugzeuge, die brennenden und kollabierenden Twin Towers und die Panik auf den Straßen mutete vielen an wie aus einem Actionfilm entsprungen. Zum anderen wurde unmittelbar nach den Angriffen eine gewisse Zurückhaltung und Rücksicht bezüglich der grafischen Darstellung eines traumatischen Ereignisses wie 9/11 erwartet. Die Fiktion selbst schien Realität geworden zu sein, und die traumatische Realität war für den Moment in ihrer Gänze nicht zu verarbeiten oder zu begreifen. Sowohl die grafisch-realistische Gewaltdarstellung als auch das Spektakel gehören jedoch zum festen Repertoire traditioneller Erzähltechnik des Terrorismus- und Actionfilms.

Meine Arbeit behandelt die Antworten auf diese künstlerischen Herausforderungen in drei Actionfilmen, die wenige Jahre nach 9/11 erschienen. Diese Filme erzählen Geschichten über Terrorismus im Actionfilm-Format und erstellen aktuelle politische Bezüge. Die Gewalterzählung jedes Filmes wird in jeweils drei Abschnitten untersucht, in Hinblick auf Inhalt, filmische Darstellungsmethoden und Referenzen auf politische Entwicklungen bzw. auf die eingangs skizzierte Problematik.

Der erste Abschnitt behandelt Rechtfertigungsmuster von Gewalt und die Gegenüberstellung von Terrorismus mit anderen Formen der Gewalt. Ausgehend von der Annahme, daß Film eine kulturelle Funktion als kollektives Verarbeitungsmedium darstellt, sind die hier durchgespielten Verhaltensszenarien und Reaktionen auf terroristische Gewalt von Interesse. Rechtfertigungsmuster, soweit vorhanden, werden aus kulturtheoretischer Perspektive und mithilfe der Just War Theory untersucht. Diese Tradition politischer Philosophie erbot sich zur Evaluation der aufgeführten Strategien der Gewaltlegitimierung. Des weiteren werden die kulturellen Muster, Formeln und Metaphern aufgeführt, derer sich die Filme bedienen, um Geschichten über Terrorismus zu erzählen und die damit verbundenen kollektiven Ängste und Traumata zu fiktionalisieren.

Im zweiten Abschnitt wird der filmspezifische Diskurs mithilfe filmtheoretischer und narratologischer Methoden analysiert. Der Fokus liegt hier auf der

Visualisierung terroristischer Gewalt, der Anpassung bzw. den Alternativen zur spektakulären Form. Daneben ist die Steuerung der Sympathien des Publikums von besonderem Interesse, da die grundsätzliche Problematik der Gewaltdarstel lung auch einen Vorwurf an den Betrachter solcher Bilder impliziert. Jeder der hier betrachteten Filme zielt darauf ab, sein Publikum einzubeziehen. So werden bspw. illusionsbrechende Strategien eingesetzt, oder es wird mit Identifikations- figuren und -signalen gespielt. Helden- und Feindbilder verweisen auf und durchbrechen die binäre Unterteilung der Welt in „uns" gegen die „anderen", wie sie traditionell im Terrorismus-/Actionfilm und gegenwärtig im politischen Diskurs praktiziert wird.

Der dritte und letzte Abschnitt untersucht zum einen, wie die Filme selbst problematische Aspekte in der Darstellung von Terrorismus verarbeiten, z.B. die gelegentlich unheilige Verbindung zwischen den Medien, Film und realem Ter- ror und wie sich ein „undarstellbares" Ereignis wie 9/11 evozieren läßt. Zum anderen wird betrachtet, inwiefern die Filme in Referenzen auf die Terrorattac- ken von 9/11 und deren politische Folgen eine politische Kritik artikulieren und eine politische Interpretation ihrer Inhalte rechtfertigen. Überdies lassen sich die Referenzen auf realexistierende Gewalt auch als filmische Antwort auf bzw. Verarbeitung der eingangs skizzierten Vorwürfe an den Film lesen. In den Fil- men *V for Vendetta* und *Children of Men* werden reale Bilder aufrüttelnder Ge- walt nachgestellt, Photographien von Abu Ghraib und Guantánamo. Etwas von der Aura des Realen bleibt diesen Bildern verhaftet, und die Filme bedienen sich bewußt dieser Qualität. *Munich* folgt der traditionellen Form einer „auf wahren Ereignissen" basierenden Geschichte, verwendet aber auch dokumentarische Aufnahmen.

Insgesamt ließ sich an diesen Filmen erarbeiten, wie die künstlerische und moralische Herausforderung der Gewalterzählung nach 9/11 angenommen und kreativ bearbeitet wurde. Indem die Filme sowohl ontologischen Anschuldigun- gen als auch politischen Gegebenheiten intelligent und kreativ mithilfe filmi- scher Mittel und Traditionen antworten, affirmieren sie ihre kulturelle Wir- kungsmacht.

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1 Introduction

The post-9/11 catch phrase - "It was just like in the movies!" – expressed our shock that we understood the language of 9/11 as our own. The terrorists had turned our technology back on us, and it seemed that the fiction had become real: "The harsh truth is that the style of al-Qaeda's attacks […] - and the whole theatre of modern terrorism - is familiar to us" (Burke). Accordingly, the movies came under attack, and in particular action movies and their tradition of spectacular destruction. This paper will look at three selected action-adventure movies and examine the way in which they respond to the narrative challenges of depicting terrorist violence after 9/11. Before explaining in greater detail the particular challenges that these films face, a short outline of the general set of problems appears appropriate.

The representation of violence or atrocity in popular culture is fraught with ethical and artistic problems. It can lend a voice where silence - or in its visual equivalent, the evasion of certain images – can be oppressive. Yet the representation of pain contains the power to derive pleasure from the aesthetic form. Where silence risks sublimating or concealing the terror, fictionalization threatens closure on unfinished business, a superficial, melodramatic, desensitizing dramatization that kills the imagination. Silence can be an involuntary necessity – as the helpless silence of the traumatized – or a conscious decision not to sacrifice the sublime. This possibility of drawing pleasure from the artistic representation is particularly true for the visual aesthetics of violence; transcending the material, visceral element of violence, the viewer can die vicariously, along with the hero.

Cinema in particular is faced with a number of problems in the depiction of violence. As cinema is a primarily visual medium, films wanting to explore the topic have to negotiate their way between a rock of traumatic taboo and a hard place of blockbuster logic, i.e. the demands of a commercial business where spectacular and realist violence traditionally sells: "In Western culture […] we've come to associate 'the horrifying' with visually explicit representations of violence […] For anything to be considered truly horrifying, it has to be seen – and, preferably, rendered as graphic and lifelike in detail as possible" (Brottman 164). Yet the method of realism always threatens to amount to a sort of "pornographic" verisimilitude (Sterritt 73). No matter how well-intentioned, looking can be a form of violence, of appropriation, and of humiliation. Attempts to disfigure or to cloak the reference on the other hand are sometimes hard to understand or do not trigger the same emotional, cathartic response:

"Verfremdungseffekte," alienation or defamiliarisation effects are related to the rather élite Modernist movement and its project of "making things new," in order to come closer to their ontological truth.

With regards to the cinematic treatment of 9/11, a certain shyness and confusion followed the event. Direct reference to 9/11 – images of the planes crashing into the towers, the burning and crumbling building, the debris and falling bodies – was initially avoided as unseemly or emotionally paralyzing.

Called for or not, Hollywood felt responsible as a source of inspiration; "three of 1998's top-grossing movies […] featured the destruction of New York City. Magical thinking perhaps, but on September 11, 2001, Hollywood felt implicated" (Hoberman). The late director Robert Altman is quoted as having said that "Afghanistan may have been the breeding ground for [September's] attacks, but Hollywood served as a source of inspiration" (qtd. in "Critic Says Films Inspire Terrorism"). "Within days, even hours, many realized that the events were not unimaginable; indeed, that they had already been imagined and written in exquisite detail in so many disaster movies: as Norman Mailer put it, 'our movies came off the screen and chased us down the canyons of the city'" (Fedderson and Richardson 164). As films were considered as having been how-to manuals for the terrorists, Hollywood edited, shelved or photoshopped certain trailers and films that were produced before 9/11 and released these only with considerable delay (e.g. *Collateral Damage* or the *Spiderman* trailer; cf. Fedderson and Richardson 164).

Yet, the charges against the visual image - and the viewer looking at it - are not new. Photography and later cinema had to fight to be considered an autonomous art form, not simply a perfected form of representing nature, merely depicting reality. The discussion on reality in cinema crystallizes around aesthetic questions and the ideological or social interaction between cinema and reality, especially in the field of violence. Apart from the repeatedly resurging notion that screen violence directly affects real violence (Cawelti, "Myths" 521-4), the gaze of the camera and by extension, the complicit viewer, has been perceived as a form of violence (Sontag "On Photography"). Susan Sontag exhaustively investigated the visual representation of violence, pain and the problem of voyeurism for the field of photojournalism. Evoking a long history of these representations, in her post-9/11 essay, "Regarding the Pain of Others," Sontag offers a fresh appraisal of some of the claims she advanced in "On Photography" in the 1970s. In the older work, Sontag had argued that on a fundamental level the image-taker is implicated in generating the image he is about to take. This resulted in her indictment of photography: "the act of photographing is more than passive observing. Like sexual voyeurism, it is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keepon happening. […] to be in

complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting, worth photographing - including, when that is the interest, another person's pain or misfortune" (Sontag, "On Photography" 12).

Also in "On Photography," Sontag had claimed that photographs have an ability to lend a greater reality, and that photographs could elicit sympathy on the part of the viewer. This empathic sympathy could, however, wear off with repeated exposure. After this point of saturation has been reached, the horror seems less real, which is why Sontag called for an "ecology of images" (Sontag, "On Photography" 154, 163-4, 207). Interestingly (and contrary to the repetitive flood of image studies on the effects of media violence), in her later work Sontag links the dulling effect not to the number of images but to the passivity of reception: "[i]t is passivity that dulls feeling, not quantity […] wherever people feel safe, they will be indifferent" (Sontag, "Regarding the Pain" 102).

Moreover, Sontag has pointed out a fundamental inequality in the visual representation of violence: The closer a subject hits home, the more discretion and dignity in death is demanded. She claims that there is a new insistence on "good taste" regarding 9/11 imagery and connects this recent shift towards modesty to deeply embedded ritualistic thinking: "we offer dignity in death to our own (after all, the enemy shows our dead exposed), but we do not do the same for African genocides" (Sontag, "Regarding the Pain" 68-70; 95).

Many cultural critics have commented on the severe impact the events of 9/11 will continue to have on artistic products. Dixon for example claims: "Just as Pearl Harbor shaped the cinema of the 1940s, so September 11 will serve as the template for the new 21st century conflict." (Dixon, "Visions" 59) Yet Dixon adds to this own assessment that after a brief period of shelving and re-cutting of hyper-violent spectacles in the days and weeks after 9/11, today, "despite the carnage of 9/11, violent films currently in release seem to be doing perfectly well at the box office" (Dixon, "Teaching Film" 118). While it seems indisputable that 9/11 resulted in a rupture and the implementation of different foreign policy paradigms on a political level, the situation is different in the cultural field. By now a number of different cultural products or works of art in response to 9/11 have appeared and reaped critical response.

Quite apparently, no case can be made that violence has become an impossible subject or that singular cinematic techniques, such as the spectacular or realist mode, have become impossible to use in its representation. This would amount to the sort of Grand Theory thinking which David Bordwell so eloquently discarded. Delineating the development of Film Theory, as well as its relation to the emancipation of Film as an autonomous art form, Bordwell rejects these Grand Narratives, from the Standard Version, the Cinema of Attractions up to Jameson's ideas about Postmodern Cinema. Bordwell proposes instead to ex-

amine the development of film style as a result of a set of problems and solutions (Bordwell, "Film Style" 139-157). What, then, are the problems the films examined here are facing and which solutions do they propose?

These three films engage with distinct challenges of narration – which include subject matter as well as cinematic techniques. Narrating, or storytelling, refers to both elements of storytelling, the story and the way in which it is told. These movies contain an explosive combination of terrorist violence in the narrative in an action film formula that traditionally invites spectacle. Moreover, they distinctly refer to real violence, inserting referential images or narratives, they respond the political fall-out of 9/11 by engaging with the U.S. response, both on the level of narrative and cinematic narration. Without introducing a watershed "Grand Theory" through the backdoor, such a combination constitutes a narrative challenge.

The films I have chosen are *V for Vendetta* (2005), *Children of Men* (2006), and *Munich* (2005). These films cover the field of blockbuster to aesthetically) independent film.[1] Blockbuster films actively seek to appeal to broad audiences and thus attempt to find the lowest common denominator, which Kleinhans refers to as "High Concept" (Kleinhans 171). From a political-ideological perspective, they can be considered as representative of far-spread fears and desires. Independent films, on the other hand, have more stylistic freedom to develop orginal aesthetic responses. All three films feature elements of the action film, whose cinematic techniques in particular have been accused of feeding terrorists dangerous ideas.

Charges have been made against the medium of film for having "pre-imagined" the event. Over and over again, 9/11 was described as having looked "just like a movie." (Rich 109; Sontag, "Regarding the Pain" 22). This implies that cinema is challenged artistically. How is the fiction going to react to having become "real"? How do the films represented here relate to 9/11 – bearing in mind Sontag's arguments about the demand for modesty in visual representation? How can a visual medium represent a painful subject which hit home as close as it gets, both cinematically and culturally? Just as the representation is framed as being complicit by *depicting* violence, the audience is being complicit by *watching* these images. In other words: If terrorism is theatre, who goes to see the show? The spectacular mode and its entertaining qualities only amplify this problem.

Building on Sontag's claim that photography changes our way of seeing and relating to reality, what can be made of the intrusion of iconic photographs in

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1 With regards to its aesthetics, *Children of Men*, while distributed by Universal, is appropriately filed under "independent" in many reviews.

these movies, which unmistakably refer to real violence? The relation between the Real and the Illusion has been introduced into the theoretical reflections in trying to grasp what happened on 9/11: "Something has been lost in the aftermath of 9/11; the reality of destruction and physical violence has been made concrete and immediate. The deaths we witnessed when the towers fell were staged, staged by terrorists, but they were real-involving real suffering, real pain, and real loss" (Dixon, "Teaching Film" 117).

Those movies that were taken to be "the simulacra [that] preceded the real" (Fedderson and Richardson 153) contained some major elements of the story of an innocent "us" under attack by an evil "them," with the American hero triumphing over the foreign devil. Thus, a premise of this work is that a "binarist splitting" and "Manichean schemas of good and evil" are still largely intact in much fiction film (Stam and Shohat 194, 201).

This tradition of binary casting is reflected and broken in these three movies. This has collateral implications for the legitimation of violence and the way in which the heroes can be distinguished from the bad guys. In other words, when the White House was destroyed in Independence Day, at least the perpetrators were bad Martians. How does this work if the terrorist is "one of us"?

In his assessment of the action-adventure film genre, Stephen Neale complains – with good reason – about the problem of linking narrative structure to policy statements by analogy in ideological analyses of genres and cycles (Neale 72). The politicized reading of these films is not meant to discard the social functions of popular culture and fiction film or the fact that their narratives are also, in a very real sense, narratives about fictional dystopian worlds or about the Munich attacks; obviously, 9/11 and post-9/11 politics are not the only relevant subtext for these films. For example, both *Children of Men* and *V for Vendetta* are adaptations from literary source texts that were written well before 9/11.

My intention is not to reduce these films to the functions examined here but to present a valid and convincing interpretation. These films' double entendre narratives and the copious amount of references support a political interpretation and contextualization. Since these movies deal with the political fall-out of 9/11 and terrorism in general, 9/11 is "always already" present, like a static noise in the background. The movies will be read for the way in which they engage with the "event 9/11" itself, in particular the link between the media, film and 9/11.

While this paper is premised on the idea that the cinematic text invites a particular kind of gaze, the aspect of an audience-specific reading (e.g. a feminist or subaltern gaze) will be excluded. An image studies approach to ethnic/racial representation will be largely excluded. The terms viewer and spectator are used as hypothetical constructs. Equally, the question of how screen violence affects real violence will be excluded. The representation of violence can have many

functions - social, cultural, identity-building - and this has been extensively researched and theorized in regards to American popular and movie culture. This paper is built on the premise that popular culture, and movies in particular, represent an agency to negotiate collective emotions, including those following a traumatic experience such as 9/11. As these films are fairly recent, there does not yet exist much academic literature specifically on the subject of these movies.

V for Vendetta and *Children of Men* depict dystopian worlds, as do their literary originals. Dystopian fiction stands in a tradition of warnings of and criticism aimed against authoritarian government. The political commentary the films present is thus already inscribed in their generic structure. All films are categorized under "action films," as all display elements of this genre, even though none of these films easily fit one rubric only. The films feature aspects of other genres, such as the war film, melodrama, science-fiction, or the documentary. Some of these various generic registers will be evoked in the analysis where appropriate.

The question of narrating violence is fascinating as it concerns both the textual and the visual level. Narrating refers to both elements of storytelling, the story and the way in which it is told. Therefore, narrative content – such as justifications and contextualization – and narrative discourse – which in film means moving and talking images – will be examined in two separate parts. Their narrative content will be interpreted with tools and ideas of Just War Theory, as the films struggle with narrating and legitimizing violence. The analysis of the films' narrative techniques is helped by the work of various film and literature scholars. Building on this analysis, the last part examines how these forms of narrating violence relate and respond to 9/11 and post-9/11 politics. As each movie finds different artistic answers to the problems of narrating violence outlined above, these analyses will be conducted separately for each movie.

1.1 Methodology

1.1.1   Just War Theory

How we judge violence depends on if we consider it legitimate. To assess the legitimacy of violence it is crucial to examine the purpose and intentions behind it as well as the consequences it carries. Just War Theory helps to establish a scientific and ethical framework for this examination. A long-standing tradition of political philosophy and ethics, Just War Theory proposes criteria to ascertain proper cause and authority (*jus ad bellum*) for violence as well as proper limits to

the means used to attain these goals (*jus in bello*). Originally developed for war, the theory is in fact applicable to other kinds of violent conflict as well. Applying a theory of political ethics seems like the appropriate intellectual equivalent to what the films do. They examine terrorism and its possible justifications as a method, not simply as a historically located event. By presenting these different forms of violence to us, the films implicitly compare, pointing out interdependences and causalities between various types of violence. Therefore, the narrative content of terrorism will be examined with the tools and ideas of Just War Theory. Of particular relevance will be Paul Gilbert's reflections on revenge, and the possibility of a just punitive war, Haig Khatchadourian's moral evaluation of terrorist violence, torture, and political assassinations as well as Stephen Nathanson's attempt to find sound moral grounds to privilege warfare and not terrorism.

Does the usage of this theory lend credence and support to the inflationary and imprecise use of the word "war," as in the problematic formula of a "War on Terror"? I do not think so. Instead, applying the same rules to different forms of violence – warfare, terrorism, targeted killings – to ascertain their legitimacy helps to avoid the facile a priori condemnation of only one form.

Moreover, Just War Theory offers sound definitions for the highly contested terms terrorism and terrorists. Both in scientific and public discourse, terrorism is "a term that suffers from conceptual devaluation or semantic entropy" (Schlesinger 5). Its uncertain or hazy contours result in a "multi-purpose pejorative which can be applied to a variety of cases of impermissible violence" (Gilbert 99). Its many definitions focus on various aspects of the act, such as the nature of the motivation, the perpetrator, the way the victims of its violence are treated and so on. The most typical definitions of terrorism focus on the nature of the methods or the nature of the terrorists. An example for a method-based definition is offered by Gilbert: "Unable or unwilling to engage enemy troops, [they] attack or kidnap civilians, engage in sabotage and so forth [terrorism amounts to the] commission of crimes – murder, hijacking, large scale destruction of property and so forth – for political ends" (98). Anderson centers his definition on the nature of the terrorists: "[terrorism is] the substate application of violence or the threat of violence to sow panic and bring about political change" (312). Khatchadourian sets forth the convincing claim that any definition of terrorism should include five aspects: the causes, the goals, the forms and methods; the nature of its participants or sponsors; and the circumstances (126). The U.S. State Department defines terrorism as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents" (McCauly 46, emphasis added). Yet, as Schlesinger points out, terrorism as a method is not limited to substate actors: Left out of most definitions is the fact that systemic state violence can amount to political terror. A broader but more

appropriate definition of "political terror" would include "coercive intimidation by revolutionary movements, regimes, or individuals for political motives […] revolutionary terrorism" (Schlesinger 82), widening our perspective from "the common sense definition of terrorism current today which presents it essentially as action taken against the state, rather than action taken by the state" (Schlesinger 83). The political history of the word terrorism reflects this fact as the term derives from the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution (Derrida, qtd. in Borradori 103). Admittedly, neither the writing nor the choosing of a definition, if only on a working basis, is politically neutral. The purpose of this paper is not to decide on any of these contested terms but to show that the films question the moral shortcuts currently circulating.

1.1.2   Narrative Discourse

The second section addresses the question of how violence is narrated, i.e. how the narrative content examined in the first section is relayed to the audience. In order to conduct an examination of narrative discourse in cinema, it is necessary to introduce and define some narratological terms, and point out where assumptions are made on narrative in film.

     The methodology and terminology will follow cognitivist scholars like David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson or Tom Gunning who applied Gérard Genette's widely acknowledged, extremely precise narratological system from literature to film.[2] Some difficulties come up in this process as cinematic narration differs from literary narration in important aspects. Nevertheless, films tell stories, and their narrative discourse offers unique qualities and opportunities.

     First of all, I rely on a basic conceptual distinction between narrative and narration or narrative discourse. The narrative is more or less an object, a sequence of events or actions: "a chain of events in cause-effect (temporal or causal) relationship occuring in time and space." (Bordwell and Thompson 55). Narration describes how and when the spectator acquires knowledge, the process of information disclosure: "Narration […] is the process by which the plot presents story information to spectator." (Bordwell and Thompson 67) The narration controls the disclosure of information. Gunning uses cinematic narration inter-

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2 The cognitivist school of film theory is interested in the work a spectator performs on the text, in the process of how spectators construct meaning from a cinematic text. This paper is based in part on the work of these cognitivist scholars, but the aspect of actual viewer's responses is wholly excluded, as well as the way in which spectatorial response is produced in terms of physical cognition, perception, and emotion. Equally excluded is spectatorship research (the pleasure of the spectator, spectatorship as symbolic activity).

changeably with narrative discourse, which he defines as "precisely the text itself – the actual arrangement of signifiers that communicate the story - words in literature, moving images and written titles in silent films" (Gunning, "Narrative Discourse" 462). Thus, narrative discourse or cinematic narration refers to the means of expression of a story. In sound film, this would be moving and talking images. While Gunning introduces more terms to differentiate his narratological system,[3] I employ narrative discourse in the sense of relating both to a film's images as well as the way in which these are presented to the viewer by cinematic techniques.

One of the important differences between cinematic and literary narration concerns the category of a narrator. Where there is an author and a narrator in a literary text, this "implied voice" is harder to define for a film; but we need the notion of narrating or a narrating agency, even if it is an implicit agency. It is important to maintain that film narratives may mimic narrators, and that there are methods of guiding (or misguiding) the viewer, similar to a literary text. Sound, image, voice-over narration, "purposeful" camera movements, and editing may compete with and contradict each other. I will assume the existence of such a narrating agency without further examining questions of authorship or implied voice. For the project at hand, more important than the agency of a narrator will be the category of *focalization*, a reformulation of the classic literary question of point-of-view (Stam 205). This category is more precise than the commonly used term "identification" to indicate the way in which a viewer's perspective is channeled. There are three basic forms of focalization: a) the *non-focalized or zero* focalization corresponds to omniscient narration, where the narration not restricted to any one character, and the narrator or the narrating agency seems to know more than any one character is represented as knowing. b) *Internal* focalization, where the narrative is restricted to what a particular character perceives or knows. In film, point-of-view editing, i.e. the cutting from a figure, a scene to what he or she sees and then cutting back - can be understood as creating the equivalent of internal focalization. c) *External* focalization, where the narrator says less than characters know. Characters perform in front of us without us being allowed to ever know his/her thoughts and feelings.

These focalizations can be fixed [the whole narrative is related from the restricted field (focalized through) a single character], multiple [involving several

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3 Genette and Gunning use three terms: "story" for the content conveyed by a narrative, narrative or narrative discourse for the means of expression of a story; and narrating to refer to the act of producing a story or recounting something, the act of telling. Gunning even introduces the fourth term of "narrativization" to describe the processes of diegesis (telling) in film as he considers film more immediately iconic, more committed to showing (mimesis). For the purpose at hand, this level of narratological complexity is not necessary to maintain (Genette, Gunning 2004).

takes on the same story from different point of views], or variable [when, over the course of the narration, the internal focalization switches from one character to another]. *Alterations* describe the moment when internal focalization switches from one character to another, or from a non-focalized into a focalized moment (Genette 189-198).

Focalization is an important category to supply a political-ideological reading, to determine the political message of these films. The parameter is helpful to describe gaps in or a division of knowledge between audience and protagonists, by giving or withholding details, it can keep us at greater or lesser distance from a character. Thus, focalization often entails a shift of empathy. To describe these processes in detail, Murray Smith's model of cinematic narration is extremely helpful. Smith argues that cinematic narration creates a "structure of sympathy" for the spectator, which involves recognition, alignment, and allegiance. *Recognition* amounts to basic understanding of figures to be recognized and identified as narrative agents. *Alignment* is defined as "the process by which spectators are placed in relation to characters in terms of access to their actions, and to what they know and feel," and *allegiance* pertains to the moral and ideological evaluation of characters by the spectator (Smith 83).

By designating the subjective access we have to a character, alignment corresponds to the category of focalization. This is especially true in the case of internal focalization, which is the standard case in Hollywood cinema. Internal focalization is often expressed through point-of-view editing.[4] Smith' differentiation between alignment and allegiance is highly useful: Alignment with a character - focusing on the character, seeing what the character sees, etc. - is not the same thing as allegiance to that character. The audience can share the point-of-view of the bad guys or the monster in horror films, without approving or taking sides with this character in a moral sense.

Obviously, a full analysis of a fiction film's narration would include many more aspects of the narrating system – the selection and ordering of story elements, the narrative voice and point of view, music interventions, mise-en-scène, sound to image relations, editing strategies. But focalization is paramount for examining how violence is narrated, how the viewer's perspective and attitude towards violence, and those committing violence, is channeled.

While alignment and allegiance do not have to be congruent, ideology seems to be significantly a character of focalization: At least in conventional films, value systems tend to be established by characters. Texts construct an

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4 Within alignment, Smith distinguishes between character and perceptual alignment. Perceptual alignment is accomplished by formal strategies such as point-of-view shots and eyeline matches, character alignment are supposed to exceed these optical techniques. These distinctions will be excluded because they lead to an overcomplex model not useful for this project.

ideological structure, which cue spectator to the ideological system and norm, assuming that the viewer accepts the norms put forward. Focalization is decisive for the way in which the cinematic text proposes a reading to a spectator.

The first part of each section examines the narrative content, the structure of violence that is presented in each movie, particularly how the types of violence are contextualized and justified, i.e. which cultural concepts are evoked to legitimize violence. Which explanations or justifications are given for acts of terrorism? Which explanations are given for the responses?

The second part addresses the question of how violence is narrated, i.e. how the narrative content examined in the first section is relayed to the audience. Elements of cinematic discourse will be analyzed, i.e. talking and moving images as the "language" of these texts. The focus will be on those categories that are particularly relevant for the project at hand, such as focalization, as this parameter channels the viewer's empathy and engagement, the visualization of violence, and the particular devices used in each film as the most distinct response to the narrative challenges outlined above.

In the last part, I want to connect the results of these close-readings to the movies' engagement with 9/11 and post-9/11 politics.

The following work hopes to contribute to the topic of narrating violence after 9/11 by presenting an analysis and a political reading of three recent action films. The analysis will demonstrate one way in which movies have responded to the narrative challenge of depicting terrorist violence after 9/11 (a challenge exarcerbated by the fact that the representation of violence is always problematic). Each film features a narrative of terrorism and explicitly references real contemporary violence - images, motifs, dialogue and narrative content.

The examined films have responded in distinct ways to the difficulty of representing 9/11 and to the charges levelled against action movies' spectacular mode. The analyis will concentrate on how each film's narrative justifies violence, the cinematic discourse on terrorist violence, and finally, how these aspects relate to contemporary politics and to the ontological charges made against movies, in particular action movies' spectacular mode.

The analysis will begin with *V for Vendetta*, fairly unadventurous visually but narratively challenging, followed by *Munich*, whose visual narration employs distinct strategies to avoid the spectacular. Finally, *Children of Men* fundamentally challenges the traditional narration of violence in the action film.

2   The Films

2.1   Narrating Violence in *V for Vendetta*

In *V for Vendetta*'s narrative, a fascist government oppresses its citizens, imposes the death penalty on owners of the Koran, and sends homosexuals to death camps. The film's hero, who calls himself V, galvanizes the government by bombing the Old Bailey building. Hijacking the state's emergency channel, V threatens to blow up the Houses of Parliament exactly a year later. V urges his fellow citizens to rise up against the oppressive government. In the meantime, V, a man deformed by fire and medical experiments who always appears in a Guy Fawkes mask, hunts down those responsible for his personal tragic history. A young woman, Evey, is unwittingly embroiled in V's plot. He initially rescues and protects, then tortures her. They fall in love. In a last attack, V commits suicide; Evey carries on his project and blows up the Houses of Parliament.

Directed by James McTeigue and produced by the Wachowski/*Matrix* brothers, *V for Vendetta* was released in 2005. The story is loosely based on a 1982/83 graphic novel by Alan Moore and David Lloyd (writer and illustrator respectively). Originally set in 1997, V was an anarchist hero fighting a fascist regime that the authors projected as the future of Thatcherite England. The film garnered large exposure worldwide and was reasonably successful at the U.S. box-office.

The first chapter (2.1.1) will inspect the cultural formula and ethical frameworks used to legitimize the various forms of violence in *V for Vendetta*. The second chapter (2.1.2) proceeds to examine its cinematic narration, focussing on the visualization of torture and terrorist violence – particularly its relation to the spectacular mode –, and audience engagement. The final chapter (2.1.3) shows how this film can be read as reacting to 9/11 and engaging with post-9/11 politics and narrative challenges. Self-reflexive elements in particular point to the role of the media vis-à-vis terrorism and react to criticism leveled against cinema.

2.1.1   Types of Violence

In the movie, three types of violence, prominently featured, frame the use of terrorist violence. As referred to in the film's title, the hero conducts a personal

vendetta, which is justified in ways that resemble the Western myth of the vigilante. The hero V equally aims to incite an uprising to overturn the fascist totalitarian regime. To this end he is willing to employ illegal methods such as *terrorism*. Side by side with V's terrorist activity, there is *political terror* by the state forces. Therefore, the concepts of tyrannicide and Just Revolution provide an interesting comparative framework to evaluate his terrorist activity: As the film raises ethical questions, an ethical theory – Just War Theory – helps to study these justifications. The third prominently featured form of violence is *torture*. The use of referential imagery in this scene and the significance and meaning that is attached to torture encourage a political reading and audience engagement with contemporary politics.

2.1.1.1   A Vendetta : Vigilantism

For American popular culture, the Western and its mythology provide one of the most influential frameworks to examine the significance of cinematic violence. This section will sketch the findings of influential studies of the Western genre to explain its resonance and importance for action film. Cinematic genre such as the Western offers a way of distinguishing good and bad violence. The Western has established symbolic narratives that turn violence into the morally necessary and imperative choice. These handed-down structures strike a chord in popular memory. Building on the work of Richard Slotkin, John Cawelti and the terminology of Rick Altman, three ways in which the Western framework is important for *V for Vendetta* will be outlined: the cultural significance of violence as a normative solution to a conflict of values, the setting up of viewers' expectations by employing certain semantic or visual codes, and finally, the justification of V's violence as vigilantism.

In "Regeneration Through Violence" Slotkin traced central myths of the frontier experience and their consolidations in popular culture back to the seventeenth century. These myths, Slotkin argues, including their codex of violence, have become sources of American national identity. Most prominent is the myth of a "regeneration through violence," which claims that the American individual gains transcendence and regeneration by first regressing into a more primitive self in the wilderness; having overcome these dangers, he then emerges as an American. Codified in the myth of regeneration, violence promises rejuvenation of the social order by ritualizing the mythical origin of the frontier violence (Slotkin, "Regeneration"). With this myth, Slotkin outlined how the use of violence could become a normative response to the problems of society, in particu-

lar how myths generate ways of dealing with historically recurring problems: "myth expresses ideology in a narrative" ("Gunfighter" 6).

Where Slotkin is concerned with myth and how it makes its way into history, and potentially, reality as well, Cawelti works with the concept of "formula" to describe the mixture of convention and invention in genre development. Cawelti examined the importance of the Western frame for popular culture. According to Cawelti, the central function of the Western lies in giving "symbolic expression" of contemporary value conflicts, such as individualism and organization, violence and legal process, conformity and individual freedom, heroism and the average man ("Adventure" 194). These tensions or conflicts were "balanced against one another and resolved in an increasingly ambiguous moment of violent action." An important ingredient for this formula is the projection of the tensions and the resolving violent moment into a "mythical past" (Cawelti, "Adventure" 249-51). The appeal of the formula largely comes from the possibility of vicariously acting out one's wishes: "The audience identifies with the hero, who performs violent actions, thereby gratifying the audience's own aggressive wishes, conscious or unconscious" (Cawelti, qtd. in Saunders 37).

The significance of violence as a normative solution to conflicts, and its historical roots as worked out by Slotkin are the cultural and cinematic context with which *V for Vendetta* works its magic. Equally, Cawelti's work on the cultural function of the Western as giving "symbolic expression" to value conflicts is important to keep in mind.

In order to explain why the Western framework is relevant for *V for Vendetta*, Rick Altman's differentiation between syntactic and semantic markers of genre is helpful. Setting out to synchronize some of the problems facing the discussion and the different approaches to genre film, Rick Altman suggests that to understand dynamics of genre we need to synthetize what he calls the semantic and syntactic approach. The semantic elements include the setting, master plot, narrational and stylistic characteristics, character typology and motifs (such as horses, guns, long shots, and a pastoral or panoramic landscape); the syntactic field concerns the ideological and psychoanalytic function of the genre. The syntactic approach has little explanatory power but is applicable to a larger number of films, while the semantic approach surrenders broad applicability to explanatory power: "It is simply not possible to describe Hollywood cinema accurately without the ability to account for the numerous films that innovate by combining the syntax of one genre with the semantics of another" (Altman 636). While Altman's topic is genre development, his terminology is helpful. He claims that viewers expect certain attitudes and ideologies, a "syntactic expectation," is set up by a "semantic signal": "Spectator response […] is heavily conditioned by the choice of semantic elements and atmosphere, because a given se-

mantics used in a specific cultural situation will recall to an actual interpretive community that particular syntax" (Altman 640-1).

When applying these findings to the film, the result is paradoxical. *V for Vendetta* does not resemble a Western in terms of most of its semantics but some codes of the Western are abided by, e.g. there is the obligatory showdown, the aesthetization of violence, aspects of V's persona, a master plot of the vigilante myth, and the ritualistic form V's violence takes. When V meets his nemesis in the showdown, his superiority of skills is conveyed by the aesthetic grace of his movements, helped by the liberal use of special effects and slow-motion. This conforms to the demand of aesthetization of violence highlighted by Cawelti. When the Western hero accepts to use violence, it is "graceful, aesthetic and, even, fun" ("Six-Gun" 15), and he endows his project with a "sense of moral significance and order" ("Six-Gun" 88). V adds his own special ritualist twist to his killings by giving out roses and by choosing a meticulously appropriate cause of death. Both the ritual of the showdown and the aesthetic beautification of violence have traditionally served to signify the Western's hero's violence as justified and good.

Even in a seemingly formulaic film genre like the Western, there are so many different manifestations that even the most tautological set of definitions – a Western film is a film set in and about the West – is not met in some films considered Western films. Therefore it is not very useful to draw up a chart and tick off where the film responds to the – necessarily arbitrary – criteria. *V for Vendetta* is not a Western in terms of most semantic outer aspects – the film is not set at a particular time in the West, there is no emphasis on landscape, or horses – but according to its syntactic or "inner aspects" (Saunders 10), the film could be interpreted as a Western. For example, the film features the central conflict of values mentioned by Cawelti. It is less as a conflict between tradition-al values and new attitudes than between two attitudes towards violence through the encounter of a punitive kind of vengeful justice exemplified by V's vendetta and a more forgiving, even pacifist attitude towards violence in Evey. The "le-gendary past" (Cawelti, "Adventure" 259) is replaced by a dystopian outlook on the future that arguably results in a similar level of distance and displacement. *V for Vendetta* is a polyreferential, consciously and constantly ambivalent postmo-dern text that draws from and refers to many movie genres (cf. 2.1.2.3), one of which is the Western. While one probably could read the film as a Western – and Slotkin has shown how other genres play off the Western structure – the point is rather that the film evokes this framework and its powerful legacy. The film sets up some of the semantic signals of "Western violence," visually, and even more importantly, in terms of syntactic or narrative structure.

Moving on to syntactic expectations, elements of the Western formula are found in *V for Vendetta*, such as the myth of the vigilante. The next section will outline how the concept of vigilantism fits in political and cultural history, examine vigilantism as influential cultural formula, and apply the findings onto the film.

Defining vigilantism is a problematic undertaking as there are many different takes on the concept, according to discipline. Political scientists define vigilantism "as a subtype of political violence (i.e. 'establishment violence')," psychologists considering "the vigilante's noble motive and premeditation toward curbing evil as important, making it the ultimate act of good citizenship (i.e. 'autonomous citizenship')" (O'Connor). With regards to the film, the application of a broader definition is useful vigilantism represents a "'morally sanctimonious' behavior aimed at rectifying or remedying a 'structural flaw' in society" (O'Connor).

The proximity of vigilantism and folk, western or cult heroes is unsurprising, as both carry an element of resistance against social authorities or ideological codes. In the last part of his famous trilogy on the mythology of the American frontier, Slotkin traces the myth of the vigilante in American frontier history and popular culture. Vigilantism in the western tradition appears to be "another aspect of the Frontier Myth, related to the savage war scenario but not restricted to it" and entails "the use of private violence for public ends, especially the elimination of criminal elements from a Frontier society" (Slotkin, "Gunfighter" 99). Mostly, vigilantism is associated with mob rule, lynch law, with "local movements occurring at various times that have in common the use of extralegal force by an organization of citizens to suppress 'criminal' threats to the civil peace or prosperity of a community" (Slotkin, "Gunfighter" 180).

Vigilante militias have a bad historical record for mob violence against racial and/or social minorities (Slotkin, "Gunfighter" 191-2). Yet apart from this 'lynch law,' Slotkin points out that there were also forms of vigilantism like the "'regulators' movements in which vigilante actions against individuals were part of a larger pattern of resistance to government authority" ("Gunfighter" 173). For vigilantism is also related to the right to bear arms, to self-defense, and "the 'right of revolution' asserted in the Declaration of Independence" (Slotkin, "Gunfighter" 173). That is to say, when the government becomes corrupt the people have a right to remake the law through revolutionary action (Slotkin, "Gunfighter" 180). This fundamental right to self-defense is manifested in the second amendment: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." (Levinson 643) There is little dispute that one purpose of the Second Amendment was to ensure that the people would be able to resist a central gov-

ernment should it ever descend into despotism. The controversial part about the second amendment is (was) rather whether it confers the right to keep and bear arms to an individual, not only to a collective, the state or a militia.[5]

In contrast to historical forms of vigilantism, which was typically collective, the vigilante myth in cultural formula usually concerns an individual. In this context, Cawelti's 1974 study of "myths of violence" in literary formulas remains outstanding. Cawelti discards an analytical approach to literary or on-screen violence based on image studies or informed by the repetitive cycle of media outrage over fictional violence in the mass media. Instead, Cawelti emphasizes the context: "in fictional works, acts of violence appear in a complex context established by generic conventions, cultural stereotypes, and the specific treatment of motive, act, and emotion, in the story in which the violence occurs" (Cawelti, "Myths" 523). Cawelti's study of the theme of "moral necessity of violence in literary formulas" (Cawelti, "Myths" 525) yields five combinable myths of violence. These are: (1) the "eye for an eye" or lex talionis myth; (2) the myth of the vigilante; (3) the myth of equality through violence; (4) the myth of the hard-boiled hero and his code; and (5) the myth of regeneration through violence. In *V for Vendetta*, the first myth of punitive and avenging justice is very obviously expressed through V's vendetta. His mission is to kill his former torturers, those who have done wrong by him. Like an Old Testament vengeful angel, V comments on his own violence as "justice (that) will be swift, righteous and without mercy." Moreover, Cawelti points out that superheroes are a variant of this first myth, and among the many generic references made in *V for Vendetta*, V can also be read as a superhero, in terms of his special abilities and his masked double persona.

Yet the myth of the vigilante is the most profitable for the film. In this myth the hero is typically reluctant to use violence. Then the hero or his loved ones are personally assaulted and society proves unable to provide justice, which is the justification for his actions. Once the hero has overcome his initial inhibitions, he kills, usually in a climactic form, for example by using a "striking skill or style" (Cawelti, "Myths" 532). In *V for Vendetta*, the semantic signal of the vigilante hero is set up by a "family resemblance" between V and such vigilante heroes as Zorro (V's pastiche persona will be discussed in greater detail in 2.1.2.3) Vigi-

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5 This problem is fiercely discussed as it bears obvious consequences concerning the question of federal right to gun-control: "[t]he Supreme Court has not determined, at least not with any clarity, whether the amendment protects only a right of state governments against federal interference with state militia and police forces […] or a right of individuals against the federal and state government[s]" (Levinson 640). Here scholarly work cannot follow events as quickly as they occur: On June 26th 2008, in "District of Columbia v. Heller", the Supreme Court affirmed that an individual right to gun ownership exists. ("High court affirms gun rights in historic decision," International Herald Tribune, June 27th 2008).

lantism is further evoked by the conceptual proximity of a vendetta and vigilantism with regards to their methods. Where a vendetta designates a blood feud, often between two families, clans or factions; vigilantism refers to the method of taking the law into one's own hands. The vigilante decides on his own authority who deserves what punishment for what crime. Both vigilantism and vendetta concern the righting of a (perceived) wrong by equal means.

Contrary to Cawelti's vigilante formula, if V had to be coaxed into using violence, this is not part of the story. For the most part however, the vigilante logic applies to V's actions. As V's quest for justice cannot be served by a corrupt government responsible for his abuses in the first place, he has to take matters into his own hands. He thus acts as judge, jury, and executioner, denying his victims the possibility of defense. Law enforcement fails as the villains are themselves identical with the forces of law. The targets of V's personal vendetta are simultaneously his archenemies and the social evil. Thus, the elements of personal vengeance (vendetta) and punitive justice are combined with the potentially legitimate goal of removing the tyrants. As in Cawelti's myth of the vigilante, which dwells on the weaknesses and corruption of society, V is "exposing the corruption and decadence of the seemingly respectable members of society" (Cawelti, "Myths" 105).

For Cawelti the central function of this myth is satisfaction of the audience's vicarious wishes: "to satisfy our thirst for vengeance against the evildoer and our feeling of frustration at the weakness and corruption of society in general" (Cawelti, "Myths" 532). The way in which *V for Vendetta* plays with these expectations and feelings of sympathy or allegiance will be discussed in detail in 2.1.2.2.

The myth of the vigilante provides an ambivalent frame and justification for V's violence. The myth sets up the syntactic expectation related to the significance of violence as normative solution, as well as the cultural significance of the Western as a catalyst of contemporary conflicts of values and attitudes. The concept appears to be politically and historically ambivalent, as it is related to the concept of punitive violence as well as a history of self-defense or the "right to revolution." The following section will examine terrorism and torture as two other prominent forms of violence in the film. With the aid of Just War Theory, a case can be made for V's use of terrorist violence.

2.1.1.2   Terrorism: Just Revolution and Tyrannicide

Two cases can be made for V's use of violence with the aid of Just War Theory, tyrannicide and inciting a Just Revolution. Just War Theory proposes criteria for

proper authority, or *jus ad bellum*, legitimate reason to fight as well as *jus in bello*, defining the kinds of violence which are legitimate in war. A war is a Just War if the following criteria are met: the act must be performed under proper authority and performed for a just cause (*jus ad bellum*). Moreover, the acts must conform to the Principle of Proportion (a proportionate response uses proportionate means, aimed at attaining political and military ends, must be preserved) and the Principle of Discrimination. Lastly, the actions must be a last resort, the ultimate sanction if that sanction can reasonably be believed to be effective. Does V have legitimate cause (*jus ad bellum*), proper authority for a just revolution and does he obey the rules in war (*jus in bello*)?

If a government fails to be just, "[if] the ruler has become a tyrant, oppressing his people rather then protecting them [having become] like an external aggressor" (Gilbert 31), "subjects may […] rebel against their ruler and even […] an individual may act on their behalf to kill him." This is the classical case of tyrannicide, which amounts to "a just war fought by sub-state actors in self-defence" (Gilbert 39): sub-state actors may rebel and take up arms against the state on the grounds that the state endangers its citizens. This case of self-defense is protected in the second amendment of the U.S. constitution. Within tyrannicide, the conditions of Just War must be fulfilled, i.e. the act must be proportionate, discriminate, acted on as a last resort, performed by someone with proper authority and for a just cause.

Revolutionary terrorism is defined as a species of political, potentially also of moralistic terrorism, or "the violence necessary to overthrow the state and to bring into being a new and better or at least putatively better social order" (Khatchadourian 137). The conditions for Just Revolution are intricate but generally resemble those of a Just War. The actors must have legitimacy or authority, there should be a just cause or right intention – related to but logically distinct from actual consequences -, the use of force, "if unavoidable, must be 'measured and restrained,' efforts should be made to avoid harming innocent persons, and revolution must be a last resort" (Khatchadourian 34).

In the film, V has reason to fight as the government's activities are clearly illegitimate. Indeed, the state acts so oppressively that there appears to be no reasonable alternative to V's revolution. Political terror committed by the state has a prominent part in the film. The state commits terror attacks against its own people and constantly transgresses its legitimate authority: The modern state is characterized by its "monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory" (Weber, qtd. in Schlesinger 9). Clearly, in *V for Vendetta* the government abuses and exceeds this legitimate monopoly of violence. State oppression includes the semantics of a totalitarian and fascist regime, such as arbitrary arrests, an unleashed secret police, restriction of its citizens' free

movement, surveillance of the populace, manipulation and censorship of the media. Most importantly, the totalitarian state even carried out terror attacks against its own people. To enhance their power, the government used biological terrorism on a subway station, a water plant and a school. Moreover, as the regime is unmistakably coded as fascist, it has the ring of the history lesson of failed appeasement to it, and V appears to have a just cause. Does he have proper authority, too? Gilbert claims that the relation between insurgent groups and the populace is right if the armed group acts in their interests which "does not imply [that the group or leader] must have 'legitimacy' in the sense that […] popular consent provides" (32). As V apparently enjoys a good standing with the populace, his tyrannicide is legitimate. He also fulfills Max Weber's criteria of a charismatic leader. Weber distinguishes three types of authority: rational authority (a leader is obeyed because of his legal standing), traditional (customary position), and charismatic (due to the extraordinary quality of the specific person). The problem with a charismatic leader is that his example is followed, but there is no legal check on him, "[f]or charisma knows only inner determination and inner restraint [which] unlike the restraints of rational or traditional office, is […] no adequate restraint" (Weber, qtd. in Gilbert 82).

Equally, one can argue that V's actions are largely discriminate (targeted killings) and proportionate as they mirror that which has been done to him. Usually Just War Theory claims that the acts of war must be taken in self-defense. However, there is also a school of thought which makes room for the possibility of punitive Just War, sanctioning punitive acts of war as having *jus ad bellum* (Gilbert 100).

Thus, a case can be made that the criteria of tyrannicide or of a Just Revolution are met. The impact of V's terrorism is moreover dampened by its juxtaposition with state-perpetrated terrorism. V's terrorism is framed as a reaction to state-perpetrated terrorism (he is the result of their experiments). *V for Vendetta* presents various kinds of violence, pointing to their similarities instead of straightforwardly discarding some (such as terrorism) and absolving another (such as war or state violence). V considers the merit of his actions evaluated according to its outcome, i.e. he subscribes to consequentialist logic: "*Violence can be used for good*," he says, and: "*Sometimes blowing up a building can change the world*." V employs the same justification when he tortures Evey, in a deeply disturbing sequence of the film which is the subject of the following section.

2.1.1.3   Torture

Like state terrorism, the lengthy torture scene points to the existence of other, equally horrendous forms of violence, thus framing and qualifying terrorist violence. The scene is relevant for a number of aspects.

First, torture and terrorism are justified with the same logic. Proponents of either practice maintain that the ends justify the means. Both torture and terrorism are supreme examples of illegitimate violence as both practices refuse "to register the humanity of their victims" (Press 223). As shown in the previous chapter, the film offers justifications for the use of terrorism. Even more than onscreen terrorism, torture is employed as a metaphor to express the problem of using violence for (potentially) legitimate goals. This section will outline the processes in torture as studied by Elaine Scarry, and sketch two theoretical approaches that illuminate the significance assigned to torture. These analyses will help to evaluate the scene, in particular the justifications given for torture in the film.

Second, the visualization of the torture sequence touches upon general problems of depicting violence. In particular, this relates to the phenomenon of spectacular bodies, the pornography of looking. This will be examined in 2.1.2.1,read both through the prism of Sontag's ideas on photography and Laura Mulvey's analysis of female objectification in cinema.

Third, the torture sequence is relevant for its use of iconographic and referential imagery. Both the visual language, recalling TV news of Guantánamo, and the narrative content refer not only to this detention facility but also to the torture scandal of Abu Ghraib. Both terrorism and torture privilege ends over means, by using "quantitative utilitarianism" (Dershovitz 198), i.e. the weighing of those tortured or killed against those saved.

Setting out to explore how human beings can even inflict pain on each other, Scarry's central concern is the structure of pain and its relation to perception. According to Scarry, any torture follows the same general structure, which is the infliction of physical pain; the objectification of the attributes of pain, and the translation of those attributes into the insigni of the regime (Scarry 56). Of the eight attributes of pain Scarry defines, those that consider the relation of torture and language, or torture and expression, will be important for studying the depiction of torture in this film. Scarry's insights are helpful to evaluate the political claim the film makes with this scene.

Scarry explains why the interrogation and confession are an essential part of torture. Her analysis is premised on the dual nature of pain: we are sure of our own pain but we cannot feel or be certain about someone else's pain. Pain has no referential content, meaning there is no pain of or pain for; as pain is essentially

invisible, the mechanisms of interrogation and confession are necessary to translate into the realm of the world of things what is taking place in terms of (essentially invisible) pain. The second function of the interrogation in torture is to reverse the roles of offender and victim. The question in the interrogation credits the torturer with a justification and motive, and it discredits the prisoner, as if the question and answer and by logical extension, his "betrayal," were of any importance (Scarry 35). The prisoner will eventually give information on a world that has, for her, ceased to exist, that is wholly appropriated by the torturer. The contents of the tortured person's consciousness are obliterated. The world betrayal connotes this shift of moral judgement. Thus, the interrogation does not stand outside of torture as motive or justification, but is internal to its structure. The question has only symbolic value within the "political fiction" (Scarry 47), and the focus on the answer or betrayal obliterates the claims of pain.

Scarry describes how torture destroys consciousness, enlarging the torturer's world and shrinking the prisoner's world to the confines of his body. Torture monopolizes language, as pain destroys the capacity for speech, at first in complaints, then by displacing learned language altogether. The torturer appropriates the voice of the prisoner. Scarry claims that ultimate domination requires that the prisoner becomes increasingly physical, that he is swallowed by his pain to the extent that only his body exists, obliterating all else of his world. Besides manifesting the extent to which the tortured person is diminished (her voice lost and her world wiped out), the confession is an objectification of the pain, and of what the person in pain experiences as self-betrayal. The prisoner's body is made a weapon against him, he feels his body hurting him. Scarry further observes a kinship between this kind of totalizing pain and death: "pain is the equivalent in felt-experience of what is unfeelable in death. Each only happens because of the body. In each, the contents of consciousness are destroyed. The two are the most intense forms of negation, the purest expressions of the anti-human, of annihilation, of total aversiveness" (Scarry 31). Torture resembles death in that it makes the body "emphatically and crushingly present and making the other, the voice, absent by destroying it" (Scarry 49).

According to Scarry, another person's encouragement can have a powerful effect on the prisoner in "this closed world where conversation is displaced by interrogation, where human speech […] disintegrates into human cries, where even those cries can […] become one more weapon (against loved ones)," reaching a prisoner "whose sole reality had become his own unthinkable isolation, his deep corporeal engulfment" (50). If a human voice of comfort and courage somehow reaches the prisoner, then this voice acknowledges the prisoner's pain, articulates one of his nonbodily concerns while he is unable to, and thus projects

a world outside "until the sufferer himself regains his own powers of self-extension" (Scarry 50).

Finally, the injuring of torture provides a way to anchor and connect the de-realized beliefs and ideas, "allow(ing) extreme attributes of the body to be translated into another language, to be […] relocated elsewhere at the very moment that the body itself is disowned." (Scarry 124) To become visible, such insubstantiated ideas need to be expressed through a body or an object made or perceived by a body. For example, in the out-injuring contest of war, "injuring provides a source of substantiation for the issues designated winner as a result of (the contest)" (Scarry 137). In the same way, though on a different scale, the hurt body and "unanchored verbal constructs" are connected in torture. The difference is that in the case of torture, the substantiating body and the confirmed belief are separated. Eventually, Scarry explains, the tortured person, exists only as body, having lost the capacity to imagine, an activity that takes place only in the mind, wholly within objects. Physical pain obliterates psychological pain because it obliterates all psychological content, whether painful, neutral, or pleasurable. This is how the torturer "wins," and substantiates his ideas in the body of his victim.

In the film, Evey is caught, interrogated and tortured, ostensibly by the state police. During her isolated torture, she finds a letter written by another torture victim. This letter gives her strength and eventually she serenely tells her interrogator she would rather die than give them information. He answers that she is free now and leaves her alone. Evey steps out of her now open cell to discover that it was a fake and that it was in fact V who had been torturing her.

Applying Scarry's analysis to *V for Vendetta* yields interesting results. The interrogation, central for torture, is present, as is the total irrelevance of the question asked – the torturer knows already the answer to his question. As Evey does not render information, the aspect of a fictive "betrayal" is absent. This ability to resist is narratively explained by the letter that Evey is given; Scarry had emphasized the power of such an external voice that acknowledges the reality of torture.

In *V for Vendetta*, torture results in Evey's radicalization, instead of diminishing her. She becomes one of a larger, eternal, immortal community of revolutionaries. Discussing militias movements, Nigel James claims that these kind of "totalities […] offer humans the psychological comfort that we require when we contemplate our own mortality" (83). In the film, Evey is given "membership […] (to) a durable totality (which gives) sense to otherwise brief and meaningless individual life." (James 83) When Evey tells her torturers she would rather die than comply with their demands, this assertion appears beside the point. For what the tortured person fears is not death but the continuation of pain. At this

point in the narrative V proclaims that Evey is liberated: "Then you have no fear any more – you are completely free." Compare Evey's new-won freedom to what Jean Amery, torture victim and Holocaust survivor, has to say on the topic: "Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world […] It is fear that henceforth reigns […] Fear – and also what is called resentments. They remain, and have scarcely a chance to concentrate into a seething, purifying thirst for revenge." (Amery, qtd. in Press 224) This is why, by leaving out the betrayal, the film makes for a problematic political reading. To recall, Scarry argued that the function of the interrogation in torture is to reverse the roles of offender and victim. A "betrayal" can only be a betrayal if the torturer's excuse is accepted, i.e. that the torturing is necessary to gain information. The question has only symbolic value within the "political fiction" (Scarry 47), and the focus on the answer or betrayal obliterates the claims of pain. Thus, by emphasizing Evey's resistance, the film remains locked within the torturer's political fiction.

Building on the same theoretical grasp of torture as Scarry, Subirats enumerates several dimensions of torture – such as "Torture as totalitarian lust; torture as an expression of liberty, sovereignty, and imperial power; torture as a spectacle and the encoded language of power" (Subirats 180). V is indeed freed of any constraints: "There simply is no moral ideal of sovereignty […] that can express with greater transparency the emancipation of the self from any and all legal or political fetters; there is no better expression of independence from human customs and norms, no clearer expression of a hegemony that recognizes no limits to its technical and imaginative prowess; there is, in the final analysis, no principle of domination that can be applied in a manner that is so innocent, so absolute, and so impeccable as occurs in the relation of the torturer and his victim" (Subirats 178).

Moving on to the justification of torture employed in the film, V repeats the crime that has been done unto him with the same logic his torturers had employed. Torture is committed both by V and the state, and both parties claim that the ends justify the means. The medical experiments done on V were justified as the necessary sacrifice that needed to be done for a greater good. Likewise, V insists on a moral obligation as justification for his torture of Evey, i.e. to liberate her of her fears, to strengthen her resolve.

Peter Paik's reading of the scene (of the graphic novel) supplements V's justifications with a theoretical basis. In his reading of the torture scene, Paik applies a principle he calls the "suspension of the ethical." Often encountered in cultural narratives, this principle accompanies a "necessarily violent self-liberation" (Paik 5) - and by extension also the liberation of your loved ones. The idea is that in situations of extreme threat, by committing violence against one's kin oneself, the enemy can no longer threaten you or them. Even the killing of

one's child would happen "out of (one's) very fidelity" to them. Paik finds examples for this type of violence, from Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, down to more recent literary examples such as the escaped slave Sethe in Toni Morrison's Beloved, who rather kills her own baby daughter than let her return to slavery: "These characters, upon finding themselves trapped in the impossible situation of the 'forced choice,' respond by lashing out at themselves and at what they hold to be most precious. The violence they commit should not be regarded as an outburst of "impotent aggressivity turned against oneself" but rather as an act of radical freedom that "changes the co-ordinates of the situation in which the subject finds himself." (Paik 8) In "striking at himself" the subject "cuts himself loose from the precious object through whose possession the enemy him in check [sic]" and "gains the space of free action." (Paik 5) As the violence is committed out of a loving impulse, Paik suggests that it is in fact the "sublime capacity for love [the letter in the film] in circumstances of unbearable pain and ubiquitous death" which expresses "the ultimate form of freedom" (41). Paik's concept of freedom is a freedom *from* being threatened with fear, not a freedom *to* do or abstain as one pleases, or the liberty to say yes and no. While Paik's observations work for the scenes in *V for Vendetta*, the element of manipulation is lacking, the way in which V systematically employs the letter to manipulate Evey, the fact that he decides, on his own account, to "liberate" Evey in this form. Moreover, a true "suspension" of the ethical would necessarily entail - as in its rhetorical twin, the suspension of disbelief - that at some point the suspension will be nullified and morale restored. Yet, once these fundamental rules are lifted, there are no rules determining how and when and by whom they will be reset.

Applied to the film *V for Vendetta*, these theoretical thoughts allow drawing the following conclusions. It is V who anchors his concept of "being free" by torturing Evey, his previously "insubstantiated idea" of freedom through the substantiating body of Evey. He demonstrates his absolute freedom, using torture as "the supreme expression of freedom" (Subirats 178). In fact, the only difference between V hurting Evey and his enemies hurting him lies in V's claim of having suffered from the act. This way of acquitting oneself of any guilt sounds like a textbook example of the "false motive syndrome," which if anything, worsens the crime. According to Scarry, this denial of responsibility and guilt has its fixed place in the torturer's universe. Scarry argues that the "continual recurrence [of the false motive syndrome] suggests that it has a fixed place in the formal logic of brutality," which is "not adequately explained by the vocabulary of 'excuse' and 'rationalization'" (58). Hannah Arendt writes about Eichmann's trickery to position himself as victim instead of culprit: "the trick […] consisted in turning these (human) instincts around, as it were, in directing them toward

the self. Instead of saying: What horrible things I did to people!, the murderers would be able to say: What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders!" (Arendt, qtd. in Scarry 58). Thus, in cases of unforgivable crime such as torture, the appeal to a higher loyalty can be considered as one of the markers of a "fascist denier," in the enumeration of that mindset provided by I. W. Charny. Attempting to define a "fascist" and a "democratic" set of mind with the help of psychoanalytic theory, Charny summarizes the language-logic techniques of denial employed by the fascist denier: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of victim, condemning the condemners and appeal to higher loyalties (144). V is as guilty as the regime of this denial.

These themes and justifications evoked in the torture scene resonate in the contemporary political climate: potential justifications for torture, torture (and war as well?) as equivalent to liberation, etc. Before returning to these topics in 2.1.3.1, it is first necessary to examine the cinematic narration in greater detail.

2.1.2 Cinematic Narration

The focus of this chapter will be the cinematic narration of violence, concerning the visualization of terrorist violence and its relation to the spectacular mode, the visualization of torture in relation to the problem of voyeurism and finally, the engagement of the viewer through the device of focalization.

2.1.2.1 Visualizing Violence: The Spectacular

The spectacular is a mode of visual narration for the representation of extraordinary destruction. Both V's vendetta and his terrorist activity are visualized in or reference the spectacular mode. As mentioned above, V's vendetta, his movements and fights are visualized with special effects and in slow-motion, and his demolitions are plainly spectacular.

Computer generated (CGI) imagery relates to the cinema of spectacle, a typical frame for action movies: "[C]ontemporary special-effects technologies represent the next justified step in a longstanding and ongoing cinema of spectacle" (Keane 116). The charges against CGIs – of causing the death of narrative by detracting from character development or emotional involvement (Barker, qtd. Keane 116) – are analogous to those made against the superficiality of spectacle. However, as Gunning has shown, the spectacular has been a staple from the earliest days of cinema. Gunning conceptualizes early cinema as a cinema of

attractions, and in relation to new thrills of entertainment in early modernity ("Astonishment" 114-133). The shock reaction of early spectators pertained not only to the still image coming to life and being a moving image but also included a general thirst for what Gunning summarizes as an aesthetic of thrills, distraction and shock: "some sense of wonder or surprise nonetheless underlies all these [early] films" ("Astonishment" 125). Whether Gunning's assessment is valid as a normative paradigm for all of early cinema or not, it was apparently an important tendency of early cinema. Gunning's argument about the cinema of attraction has been adopted by other theorists to account for later forms of spectacular attractions, such as special effects.

Gunning's ideas have also been employed to better understand the pleasure of the spectator: "The notion of 'attraction,' especially, has opened up theories of film spectatorship to consider the power of diverse spectacles in cinema to undermine and challenge narrative's realist grip" (P. Cook 370). Some genres in particular promise the spectacular to its audience. In his examination of the action-adventure and disaster genre, Stephen Keane points out that the spectacle in these films must not be read in an elitist way, where spectacle wins over substance or artistic ingenuity. Instead, he claims, the spectacle of destruction can be read almost as a character in itself, such as the ship and its destruction in Titanic (Keane 113-4). For all the attempts to immerse special effects into the narrative, they also stand out as object itself, equal or superior to the narrated story (Keane 116), and their stunning quality is part of their attraction and part of spectatorial pleasure.

The terrorist action in *V for Vendetta*, i.e. the demolition of buildings, is visualized in the spectacular mode: "The spectacular involves an exaggeration of the pleasure of looking. It exaggerates the visible, magnifies and foregrounds the surface appearance, and refuses meaning or depth. When the object is pure spectacle it works only on the physical senses, the body of the spectator, not in the construction of a subject." (Fiske 243) The way in which V designs his demolitions points to this particular form of scopophillic pleasure. V combines the detonations with fireworks and classical music, beautifying his own violence, celebrating, enjoying, savoring his attacks, and quoting the bonmot attributed to the anarchist Emma Goldman: "A revolution without dancing is a revolution not worth having." The piece he plays is Tchaikovsky's 1812 overture, which combines Russian folk songs as well as the national anthems of France and Russia and ends on a grand fireworks finale, is typically played on Independence Day. The narrative thus draws attention to how the spectacular is intertwined with cherished national symbols.

V's demolitions reverberate with referential and symbolic value. The first attack destroys the Old Bailey, the Central Criminal Court in England. It houses

the Crown Court and has played host to a number of famous case, including famous judicial errors. The second attack is to blow up the Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament, which is what Guy Fawkes had attempted and failed to do. For this final attack, V uses the subway system, in an uncanny foreboding of the real London tube bombing in 2005. The famous Big Ben clock serves as background foil for the vicious TV pundit - *V for Vendetta* makes unmistakably clear that the symbolic weight of these buildings has been compromised and appropriated by those in power. As the buildings are presumably empty, the significance of blowing them up lies in the symbolic field, and the relation of these spectacular images to 9/11 will be examined in 2.1.3.2.

The next section will examine how torture is visualized in the film. To re-call, Scarry argues that pain's dual nature – one is sure of one's own pain, some-one else's pain invisible – necessitates its translation by the "betrayal" of confes-sion. Scarry points out that pain is exceptional among emotions, because it has no referential content. For this reason, pain resists "objectification in language" (Scarry 5). This inexpressibility has political consequences in the distorting de-scription of phenomena such as war or torture. These are reduced to purely in-formation-gathering or strategic terms, leaving out their central activity of injur-ing human bodies.

The visual language to represent pain is faced with similar problems. As mentioned before, the representation of violence in cinema always entails a po-tential for voyeurist looking relations, and this problem is exacerbated in *V for Vendetta* by the fact that the subject being tortured is a woman: "All images that display the violation of an attractive body are, to a certain degree, pornographic" (Sontag, "Regarding the Pain" 95). Sontag explores a viewer's ability or inability to feel empathy when repeatedly exposed to previously shocking images of pain and degradation (Sontag, "Regarding the Pain"). Such images are popular sub-jects, and they can be beautiful: the spectacular of destruction, the sublime of war films, the surreal or aesthetic of ruins, beautiful bodies in pain.

In *V for Vendetta*, two techniques circumvent a voyeuristic gaze on Evey's pain. Firstly, the film employs a non-fetishistic kind of editing and framing of character and secondly, the film invokes "real" images, which will be examined in 2.1.3.1. There are relatively few images of Evey's torture, which, arguably, circumvents the necessarily voyeuristic and pornographic aspects of depicting violence. Instead, we are mostly onlookers to Evey's pain, registering her reac-tions from a bird's eye point of view. She appears increasingly diminished vi-sually, which underlines her helplessness and visualizes the vulnerability of her body.

Evey is not presented in a fetishistic fashion. Mulvey famously pronounced the female part in cinema as being the object of the gaze, which she termed to-

be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey). While Mulvey's analysis has been qualified and diversified since the publication of her essay in the 1970s, she still offers some elementally true insights. Thus, she argues that one of the ways in which women are objectified is through body fragmentation, assigning a voyeuristic part to the viewer. Of Evey, by contrast, we mostly see her whole body. Even at the beginning of the film, when she is dressing up and her persona is still in a passive, feminized place, both literally and optically, we are not invited to voyeuristically gaze on her.

Torture physically changes, hardens, and mentally radicalizes Evey, which is expressed by her increased androgyny. Her shaved head signifies the appropriation of her body by her torturers, visualizing the irreversible change the experience has brought about her. As a literal, corporeal sign that marks her difference, the shaved head disfigures and apparently camouflages her visually, just like V's mask hides him. By keeping the shaved head, she enlarges the meaning of the act. Her bare skull now stands for her new role, her movement from helpless victim to self-reliant warrior woman. The price for this empowerment is sort of a masculinization, reflected also in dress and demeanor.

Eventually, however, where V set out to kill his torturers, Evey turns "the other cheek," literally loving the one who wronged her. Instead of demonstrating "that the regime deserves destroying because it does not respect the dignity of the people" (Press 224), Evey exhibits a variation of a Stockholm syndrome by showing loyalty to her tormentor. The two protagonists can be read as incarnations of two attitudes towards violence, the punitive kind of vengeful justice exemplified by V versus a more forgiving attitude towards violence embodied by Evey. This encounter most obviously lends itself to be read through the prism of a Western framework of value conflicts or a gender framework. Darius Rejali, for example, relates the discourse on torture to a discourse on masculinity, and Neta Crawford examines how feminist theory would read the "gendered categories of thought-stereotypes […] a binary logic of opposites [as the] primary lens through which we see the conflict […] the masculine stereotype is the resilient United States, which is able to pick itself up […] go find the culprits, and kill them or 'bring them to justice.' […] The feminine stereotype is exemplified by those who articulate a primarily nonmilitary response to terrorism. Such responses are rejected as soft, effeminate, and by definition ineffective because they are nonmilitary and understood only as useful supplements to war" (Rejali; Crawford 19). While these approaches will not be elaborated in more detail, their basic point is well taken with regards to the fact that the change in Evey's behavior is visually expressed in gender-related terms. Secondly, reading V and Evey as embodiments of two attitudes towards violence is important to keep in mind to appreciate the effects of shifts in focalization and shifts in spectatorial alle-

giance that the next chapter will explore. The torture sequence in *V for Vendetta* is crucial because the scene is played out in such a way as to shift our point of view away from V and the ideological norms that he stands for. The following sections investigate in detail how this is done.

2.1.2.2 Alterations in Focalization

While there can be multiple, fluctuating or contradictory identifications with one or several characters, these readerly freedoms are limited by the way in which the narrative controls and discloses information, for example when we have no information on a character. The parameter of focalization is a useful and precise category to indicate the way in which the viewer's point of view is channeled. Focalization shapes our perspective and attitude towards violence and those committing violence.

In *V for Vendetta*, the process of disclosing narrative information, a division of knowledge and alterations in internal focalization, entails a shifting of empathy. The narration controls information in such a way that the audience is encouraged or tricked to engage with, to be disappointed by the character of V and the idea he embodies.

Initially, V draws the audience's sympathies to his persona. The audience first encounters him in the role of the swashbuckler-nobleman, a knight saving a damsel in distress, i.e. the frightened victim Evey from the fingermen who are threatening to rape and kill her.[6] We are prepared and encouraged to consider V the hero. Notwithstanding some potential reservations with regards to the excessive elements of his violence, V remains coded as hero and the figure of audience identification until the torture scene. During the torture sequence, the viewer shares Evey's point of view. Like her, we have only limited knowledge of the circumstances of her predicament and are shocked to discover the true identity of her torturer. After the torture, Evey leaves. She literally disappears from the screen. Having no idea where she is or what she is doing, the viewer again follows V's trajectory, if only for lack of an alternative. We are aligned with V's point of view but our allegiance has shifted to Evey.

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6 Twice cinematic clichés of presenting the female body are taken up, making unmistakably clear the performative character of these roles. At the beginning of the film, when she is as a damsel in distress, and V is defending her, offering with witty humor and almost anchronistic gallantry; the second time, she is dressed up as a nymph prostitute. Both times the image is presented in such a hyperbolic fashion that if there is aesthetic pleasure derived from the scene it cannot work unconsciously. Also, in both instances, Evey is obviously performing – in the first case, for her boss, then on V's demand and then on her own.

This chronology of information disclosure is consciously shocking. The torture scene irreversibly changes the view on V's persona. Where V had seemed sympathetic, heroic, moralistic, witty and protective before, he now engages in one of the most immoral and unfair forms of violence. In torturing Evey, V repeats the crime that has been done to him. He turns from passive innocent victim to active, conscious guilty culprit. Even in the use of this most atrocious means, V mirrors his opponents.

The audience is thus drawn into the problem and ambivalence of each character's behavior. A similar "trick" of withholding and disclosing crucial information is employed in the characterization of the enemies. The enemies are initially pure embodiments of evil. They are visualized as cartoonish quotes from the graphic novel and presented as figures of corruption: A sadist chief of justice, a hypocritical bishop engaging in depraved sexual activity, a power-hungry and paranoid High Chancellor. The figure of the doctor breaks this pattern. She is first introduced as a perturbed, frail, haunted old woman, full of remorse, who thanks V when he comes to kill her. This positive image of the doctor is subsequently qualified when it is revealed that she has been the medical chief at V's camp. The voice-over narrating her harsh and cruel diary entries are shocking as these stand in total contrast to the friendly woman we encountered so far. She actively despises her victims because of their miserable state that she has brought about. Her complete lack of empathy and total disavowal of her "subjects'" humanity is made stronger by having it presented in the intimacy of a voice-over narration, in the confidential style of a diary and accompanied by images of the horrors at the camp. Thus the doctor turns out to be a figure of corruption as well, whose actions are in blatant violation of her Hippocratic oath. She stands for the clinical-medical element of state suppression, completing the total failure and corruption of all social institutions – church, government, justice system.

To summarize, the viewer variously focalizes with V's or Evey's perspective. By strategically withholding information, the audience is coaxed into engaging with the ambivalent concept embodied by V: terrorist, vigilante, or revolutionary. Focalization tricks the viewer to empathize with a figure that is revealed to be at least ambivalent. In this way, the film forces the viewer to become aware of his own capacity for cruelty: "The guilt of having identified with the scoundrel or hero is never dissipated and viewers must bear the responsibility for their individual desires all alone" (Sobchack 112).

2.1.2.3   Heroes and Enemies

After the 'loss' of communism as suitable cinematic enemy, Dixon argues, the new enemy in action film had preferably been some kind of a terrorist other, with variations ranging from "Euro-Terrorists, narco-terrorists, neo-Nazi terrorists […], homegrown terrorists […], Russian terrorists […], Bosnian terrorists [to] islamic terrorists" (Dixon, "Visions" 71). Particularly the *Die Hard* cycle had almost become a generic label for terrorist movies in its own right (Keane 70). Thus, in the typical terrorist action movie, the terrorists are depicted as an alien "other." If the terrorist is homegrown, he is usually disturbed or psychotic, as in *Swordfish* (2001).

After 9/11, the use of these Manichean structures appeared to be generally amplified. 9/11 was perceived and rhetorically framed in terms of an alien attack on American soil, perpetrated by an un-American and ethnic "other," evoking the traditional Them-Us distinction. In his assessment of post 9/11 cinema, Dixon claims that "fear of the other" is a shaping force, which divides "the world's populace neatly into two opposing camps – 'them' and 'us'" (Dixon, "Visions" 60).

Like many liberal theorists, Zizek calls for recognizing the resemblance between these camps, and his work has received particular resonance: "Whenever we encounter such a purely evil Outside […] we should recognize the distilled version of our own essence [in this evil Outside]" (Zizek, "Desert"). *V for Vendetta* responds to this call by presenting, in the character of V, "the terrorist in us." As there is very little information on V's true character, no (ethnic or racial) stereotyping is possible. V is not an "Other" but one of us, both hero and terrorist. Because of this lack of information, Paik calls him "the embodiment of an empty signifier" (Paik 17). The following sections will contest this assessment of "emptiness." V's persona is firstly significant as he incarnates the very ambivalence at the core of the terrorist/freedom fighter idea. Secondly, it is relevant that V's pastiche persona assembles various real and cinematic predecessors.

The political history of terrorism results in a "semantic instability," which reflects not only our "inability to name the thing adequately" (Derrida, qtd. in Borradori 105) but also expresses "strategies and relations of force. The dominant power is the one that manages to impose and thus, to legitimate, indeed to legalize […] on a national or world stage, the terminology and thus the interpretation that best suits it" (Derrida, qtd. in Borradori 105). The idea incarnated by V goes by many names: political self-defense, violent rebellion, terrorism, freedom fighting, and vigilantism. V models himself after Guy Fawkes, a Catholic extremist who, on a 5th November in 1605, wanted to blow up Parliament. Guy Fawkes has become a cult or folk hero, despite the fact that the historical per-

son's mission and means might have been questionable. Like Fawkes, V is quite fanatic and dies a martyr. By linking V to this historically controversial prede-cessor, the audience is reminded of the flipside of History. For the U.S. context, Parenti reminds us that acts of civil disobedience have a tradition in the U.S. system, from the Declaration of Independence to Thoreau's civil disobedience or the Seneca Falls' convention. Forms of "illegal protest" might sometimes be the only resource people have "[a]t times when government is truly 'remote' and unresponsive" (Parenti 128). Even though he is the leader of a revolution, V's ambiguity makes it almost impossible to read V's actions as a modern-day Dec-laration of Independence or as emancipation from real political tyranny.

This semantic instability reaches back to the vigilante figure. The vigilante and the criminal are both "victims of the same social forces, the same 'structural flaw,' and vigilantes are the victim of a flawed society in the same way a crimi-nal can be considered a victim of society" (O'Connor). This terminological un-certainty – terrorist, vigilante, freedom fighter and criminal – is reflected in the figure of V. V's speech and demeanor is tongue-in-cheek, hyperbolic (and thus entertaining), yet the concept he embodies is appealing, forceful, and dangerous. He is a terrorist and freedom fighter in the film, an anarchist in the graphic nov-el. His ambivalent persona embodies the ferocious linguistic battle that is taking place over these highly contested terms: terrorist or criminal, terrorist or human being, terrorist or freedom fighter. The proximity of V and the vigilante points to some of the most cherished American ideals.

V's self-fashioned character is a composita of references to literary or ci-nematic and historical predecessors. V consciously creates his persona according to various avenging heroes of popular fiction, copying and combining their looks, speech and clear-cut codes of justice. His persona recalls the Western vigilante (cf. 2.1.1.1), the Phantom of the Opera,[7] popular heroes such as the Count of Monte Christo[8] or Zorro.[9] *V for Vendetta* and its hero in particular hit

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7 Both in the character of V and his relationship with Evey there are parallels to Gaston Leroux's Phantom of the Opera. V and the Phantom are both masked, move through subterranean spaces, and have a score to settle. Both use the prop of the rose – where the Phantom gave a rose to his love Christine, V gives his victims a rose.

8 Like Monte Christo, V fashions his new identity for himself. In Dumas' The Count of Monte Christo, which V watches and imitates, a wronged hero returns as an independently wealthy man, and under an assumed elegant persona wreaks vengeance on those who betrayed him.

9 The typical Zorro figure is of a black-clad masked outlaw who defends the people of the land against tyrannical officials and other villains. As in V's case, Zorro's secret identity mostly remains intact (variations depending on the outlet, such as early pulp novels, the movies, later novelizations of the theme). Like Zorro, V leaves his distinctive mark in the form of a letter. Both figures favor the rapier as weapon, both wear a mask, a black cape, both have a subterranean refuge or lair, both trick their opponents by cunning, and both set out to avenge, to punish. Zorro is more of a Robin Hood character but both figures apparently feel a duty to society.

the marks of the swashbuckler genre through V's witty use of humor, his roman-
tic appeal and gallantry, as well as his favor of dazzling swordplay and the paro-
dy of Evey as damsel in distress. The swashbuckler genre, according to Steve
Neale, tends "to rely on costumes and coiffeur rather than muscles" (75). On a
narrative level too, there are analogies to the swashbuckler: "most (swashbuck-
lers such as Zorro) oppose what they characterize as tyranny, and often portray
just – if limited – rebellions and struggles for freedom" (Neale 77). The mélange
in itself is not new, not even the conscious flaunting of it. For example, the hero
of *Die Hard* is a mix of cop, Rambo, cowboy, the film "stamps its hero's pedi-
gree in terms of popular heroes of the past" (Keane 72). What is particular about
V for Vendetta is rather the final disappointment of the expectations thus set up.
In the genres evoked in V's persona, heroes and villains are clear-cut in black-
and-white. V's ambivalent character stands in contrast to these clear moral
boundaries. V is elegant, educated, polite and intelligent, a pure emblem of civi-
lization, and he displays a capacity for sang-froid cruelty, a relentless and merci-
less determination to kill.

The effect of presenting such a pastiche character is to point out the ambiva-
lences inherent in these cultural shortcuts and cinematic frameworks. It is here
that the film references the complicity of its own medium in perpetuating certain
patterns of justifying violence.

To summarize, the viewer is disappointed by the initially righteous figure of
V, to the point of feeling uneasy about having rooted for him. In this way, the
audience is encouraged to think about the inherent ambivalency of the idea
represented by V, i.e. terrorism/self-defense/freedom fighting.

The figure of V moreover exposes the extent to which this thinking is cultu-
rally, in particular cinematically, embedded. While V creates his own persona
from a wide range of pulp heroes, it is impossible to uphold the clear-cut enemy
and hero images of these genres. This move engages the viewer by first appeal-
ing to known schemes and then dissolving their clear boundaries. Illustrating the
fear that "We turn into Them," V's response mirrors and repeats the act that
caused it. Clear moral boundaries dissolve. Thus, the narrative of *V for Vendetta*
questions commonly employed cultural and political justifications. The next
section will examine how the use of references justifies a reading in the post-
9/11 context.

2.1.3   Narrative Challenges

Building on the previous analysis, the following section carves out how *V for
Vendetta* deals with the particular narrative challenges that arise from combining

a volatile subject (a terrorist narrative) with a referential visual language in an action-film format.

This section will examine the use and function of references in the film as well as the effect of reenacting famous photojournalist images. The references in *V for Vendetta* serve various purposes. The references manifest, justify and encourage a political reading, commenting on the politics that followed the 9/11 attacks. Moreover, references to contemporary topics are merged with references to historical atrocities and literary dystopias, which supplies a reading of the film as a warning. Finally, the category of self-references engage with the charges levelled against cinema of having pre-imagined 9/11.

2.1.3.1   References: Post-9/11 Politics

Before outlining the references to post-9/11 politics, it is interesting to record that these are merged with references to other dystopian texts – most prominently George Orwell's 1984[10] – and references to real historical dictatorships. With regards to the former, one might note that dystopian fiction stands in a tradition of warnings of and criticism aimed against authoritarian government (Seed 68). Arguably, the political commentary the film presents is "always already" inscribed in its generic structure.

The reference to cases of historical fascism equally supplies a reading of the film as a warning. Most vividly evoked are German fascism and the Holocaust: The farewell greeting in the film, "England prevails," and the images of the swastika conjure up Nazi Germany, as does the "newly created post of a High Chancellor" and the Chancellor's rise to power on a populist agenda, which is visualized in a quick-paced "newsreel style" montage. As in historical fascism, state, church and medical institutions appear to work together - V has been medically experimented on, recalling Josef Mengele's notorious experiments and Nazi camps in general. Hannah Arendt characterized these as "laboratories where changes in human nature [were] tested [and] the transformation of human nature [was] engineered for the sake of an ideology" (Robin 97). Dropping like flies, the human guinea pigs of the camps in *V for Vendetta* are buried in mass graves. The visual images of this scene echo any genocide ever seen. While not directly enacting the torture pictures, the naked shaven bodies in the graves echo the human pyramids of Abu Ghraib. As they are covered in powdered dust, the

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10   The references of V for Vendetta to 1984 range from the visuals of ever-present television screens and slogans, the use of newspeak, the story of a state conspiring against its own people and rewriting history to star intertext: The High Chancellor Sutler, personification of 1984's Big Brother, is played by John Hurt, who played Winston Smith in Michael Radford's film version 1984 (1984).

dead bodies recall the Holocaust and 9/11. These are part of the "most remembered" atrocities, according to Sontag. She argues that those atrocities of which we have few or no images (Sontag cites large-scale rape) are not secured in collective memory, while others are overphotographed (Sontag, "Regarding the Pain" 83).

Nevertheless, the totalitarian state in *V for Vendetta* is fiction, and its jigsaw use of references to previous fascist regimes[11] serves to create an atemporal template, without containing the danger by locating it in the past. Instead of displaying 9/11 as a specific and insular traumatic event, the film frames terrorism as repetitive and historical phenomenon in our world.

Moving on to contemporary references, these question the U.S. response to 9/11 by evoking parallels between the dystopian state in the film and the incursions of civil liberties after 9/11. The narrative warns against assaulting a tradition of secular humanism and highlights in particular the topos of a trade off between individual freedoms and security. As *V for Vendetta* is a very densely layered text, a few examples shall suffice to support a political reading of the film in the post-9/11 context.

The TV pundit in *V for Vendetta* who blames all evil on homosexuals and general "Godlessness" is a reference to the conservative Evangelicalists Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson and their insinuation that God lifted up His protection of the U.S. as a punishment for Americans' sinful lives: "Deserving of equal, if not greater, blame for 9/11 […] the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays, and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America'" (Falwell, qtd. in A. Cook 6).

Recounting the assaults on secular humanism and sexual tolerance, a character asks, "Why do they hate us?" These words evoke the speeches of President Bush shortly after the attacks as well as the response he has been giving: "Americans are asking, why do they hate us? […] They hate our freedoms our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other." (Bush)

There are many examples for the way in which words change the perception of reality. A military officer tells the searching Detective Finch that things went missing during the reclamation, "things" presumably referring to and thus objectifying human beings. The order to torture Evey is cloaked as "to process," transforming the act into a production-related proceeding, ameliorating, facilitating

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11 For example, the black bags recall Southern American dictatorships, Ku Klux Klan hoods and their notorious lynching, the threat of biological attacks recall contemporary threat scenarios and the Anthrax attacks, and the state's religious fundamentalist stands in contrast to the atheism of historical National Socialism.

handling of a person. Visually, this power of and violence committed through the use and abuse of words is expressed in close-ups: grotesque, gross images of powerful people's mouths, as they are uttering words of order, of falsehood, incitements to lie. Watching a surveillance tape of V pacing alongside the unconscious Evey and trying to interpret his behavior, the police are playing off V's humanity against his being a terrorist.[12] Even earlier, the audience has learned a terrorist is stripped of human qualities, when the TV pundit relentlessly hammers home that "this is not a man. A man does not wear a mask. A man does not blow up a building." The news writing of the ideologically corrupted media is characterized by the use of valuing adjectives, and an ornate style, e.g. "a psychotic terrorist […] (broke into Jordan tower) in order to broadcast a message of hate […] during this heroic aid, the terrorist was shot and killed." V's uncertain ontological status – a terrorist or a freedom fighter, hero of the film or Evey's torturer – further reflects contemporary linguistic debates. When it comes to terrorism, the battle over language is ferocious, both in scientific and public discourse. It is a linguistic and ultimately ontological battle over the meaning of words and of reality after 9/11. The Bush administration has entered a controversial course of framing terrorism as an act of war as well as criminal activity. By selectively combining the war model and the law model, Washington was able to maximize "its own ability to mobilize lethal force against terrorists while eliminating most traditional rights of a military adversary, as well as the rights of innocent by- standers caught in the crossfire" (Anderson 321). A similar ontological debate is taking place with regards to the treatment of detainees/prisoners at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib. Terminology is decisive not only in legal rights but in deciding on public perception and measurement of violence. In this way, the film reflects the current debates.

Finally, there are "Creevey's black bags." Like so many motives in this film, the black bags offer a whole range of connotations and possible meanings. Literally, they evoke the Abu Ghraib torture pictures. In dialogue, "Creevey's black bags" are a shortcut for the abduction of people. Particularly in this usage they seem to refer to the recent suspension of habeas corpus: "the names and identities of the captives in the war on terrorism are as unknown to us as the methods being used against them" (Press 224). The black bags therefore relate to missing persons in general. The missing persons who have been retained without a right to petition for relief from unlawful detention, or to those missing persons of military dictatorships or those who died in the 9/11 attacks as well as to the black hole where some of the images of that attack have vanished (Brottman

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12 Policeman I: "Is he considering leaving her? After she just saved him?" – Policeman II: "He's a terrorist. you can't expect him to act like you and me." – Policeman I: "Some part of him is human…"

167). The black bags are a visual symbol of loss, a way for the film to depict something vanished, missing or absent.

Some scenes unmistakably include iconographic images, e.g. the flashbacks recounting "America's war" are accompanied by images that look like the TV news on current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This iconography becomes most prominent in the torture sequence. These scenes contain imagery which bluntly refers the viewer to Guantánamo: the orange-clothed prisoners have shaved heads, several times black bags are pulled over a person's head. The torturing itself refers to the highly publicized torture cases of Abu Ghraib. Apart from keynotes of torture that are deeply embedded in cultural consciousness, such as being held in isolated custody and being given bad nutrition, Evey is subjected to specific practices that have recently come to public attention, such as the suffo-cation-by-water practice resembling waterboarding: "The Amnesty report lists sixty […] practices routinely employed at U.S. detention centers [such as Guan-tánamo which include] immersion in cold water to simulate drowning, forced shaving of facial and body hair, […] humiliation […] physical exertion to the point of exhaustion […] and mock execution" (Guelke 199). This is a direct reference to recently publicized cases of torture performed by U.S. personnel.

Building on the previous analyses, it is now possible to record the criticism articulated in the torture scene. The justification of torture as liberation is thrown into doubt, as is the torturer's attempt to evade taking responsibility for his deeds. The narrative equally engages with the proposition of a "suspension of the ethical" in critical times, at least read through Paik's analysis. Its many ambigui-ties notwithstanding, the political stance of the film is made clear by the shift in audience allegiance that takes place during the torture scene (2.1.2.2). The au-dience is made to empathize with Evey, rather than objectifying her, helped by a "non-fetishistic" form of editing (cf. 2.1.2.1). A political reading is further en-couraged through the intrusion of iconographic images.

The relation between virtuality and reality had already been a key topos for the Wachowski brothers' previous big hit, *The Matrix*. *V for Vendetta* obviously uses the cinematic language of this predecessor. The film combines the shocking "reality impact" of the referential images with the artificial and de-realizing effects of comic book violence (the slow-motion, the CGIs in the showdown, the gory results of the rapier). In *V for Vendetta*, 'the matrix' (of violence) is Evey's prison cell. When she leaves, she discovers her guard to be a dummy. In a true Matrix move of "reality as illusion," what has been power incarnated to her, turns out to be lightweight, hollow substance. Yet there is reality in the illusion for her torture was real. This uneasy combination of virtual and real relates to the Abu Ghraib torture pictures. Subirats claims that in these images the absolute reality of torture and the artificiality of pornography entered an uneasy union. A

process of "mediated trivialization" and "fictionalization of reality" (Subirats 182) reached an extreme height in these pictures.

By enacting these real images of nightly TV news within a fiction film, the torture scene engages with theoretical approaches towards understanding 9/11. The cinematic quality of the event, it was argued, challenged conceptions of and the relation between the real and the virtual. This relation is the subject of Zizek's famous post-9/11 essay "The Desert of the Real" in which he claims that the "unthinkable" of 9/11 was simultaneously the object of fantasy and thus, "America got what it fantasized about." (Zizek, "Desert"). By invoking iconographic images of real violence, the torture scene turns the charge of the "intrusion of the real" upside-down; here, the fictional employs the real.

Moreover, the torture images in *V for Vendetta* jump registers from comic book to evening news. Sontag had pointed out that the context for receiving images of atrocity is a decisive factor in determining how a given audience will respond. The shift in registers arguably requires more activity from the viewer. Also, the referentiality of the torture images break the film's illusionistic flow. This is important bearing in mind Sontag's indictment of a passive reception.

V for Vendetta pairs historical references with fairly explicit critique of contemporary politics, embedded in a dystopian narrative. Taken together, these techniques levy a scathing political condemnation. Also, instead of displaying 9/11 as a specific and insular traumatic event, the film frames terrorism as repetitive and historical phenomenon in our world. Moreover, *V for Vendetta* introduces aspects that reflect on charges made after 9/11 concerning the relation of virtuality and reality. This topic also ties in with the cinematic history of the film's makers. Jumping registers by pairing comic or highly "fictional" techniques such as CGI with highly referential images circumvents a passive consumption of images.

2.1.3.2   Responding to 9/11: Charges against Cinema

While *V for Vendetta* is not a film about 9/11 itself, the terrorist attacks are present in a viewer's mind by sheer choice of narrative content - a terrorist is blowing up a symbolic building - and the narrative's engagement with politics that arose in response to 9/11. This section will examine in particular the following aspects: the significance of blowing up a symbolic building and self-reflexive elements which point to the role of the media vis-à-vis terrorism.

The Twin Towers of the World Trade Center were chosen as targets in part for their symbolic value, as representatives of "the economic place or capital 'head' of world capital" (Derrida, qtd. in Borradori 96). The towers' significance

followed a "secularizing logic" moving from the divine to the human, observes Paul Goldberger: "before there were skyscrapers, the horizon in most cities was dominated by Church steeples […] The earliest skyscrapers wrested control of the skyline from God and gave it to Mammon, where it has pretty much remained" (Goldberger, qtd. in Fedderson and Richardson 160). In his essay on skyscrapers and modernity, in particular the World Trade Center, Juan Suárez proposes that there is a parallel between the attempt to control and unify disparate masses through urban design, in an attempt "to reach social through aesthetic harmony" (Suárez 107). Exploring this spatial symbolism, Suárez believes that these spaces carry architectural and historical dismay, that a "terror also springs from our own spaces; the extent to which our modernity in general, and modern architecture in particular, are often in themselves regimes of horror" (Suárez 114). The targets in *V for Vendetta*, the Old Bailey or the Houses of Parliament do not belong to this particular kind of spatiality. These buildings gain symbolic weight through their use, not the way in which they are built. (Suárez' argument is premised on the idea that a certain spatial logic such as "ocular centrism" embodies a social-economic logic, i.e. capitalism). Nevertheless, there is an anarchic, and liberating element to the blowing up of these buildings that is related to the freeing and the re-appropriation of administered public space.

This aspect leads to the conceptualization of terrorism as art. Both art and terrorism are seen as potentially comprising an aesthetic experience, i.e. the spectacular or sublime in the case of terrorism. The idea goes further back than to Karl Heinz Stockhausen - who controversially described the demolition of the Twin Towers as 'a work of art' -, at least as far as to the German anarchist Johannes Most who wrote a pamphlet on the Philosophy of the Bomb (Burke). Burke examines the similarities: "Terrorism - and this includes spectacularly publicised events such as 11 September as well as videoed executions - has always needed an audience. Bomb blasts on symbolic targets and killings on camera are dramatic productions designed to elicit an emotional response - just like theatre" (Burke).

Obviously, there can be considerable aesthetic or visual unease of watching the "spectacle" of blowing up symbolic buildings in *V for Vendetta* (even though these are presumably empty). The film plays to and encourages this unease. At the same time the audience is repeatedly reminded of the virtuality of the product they see, encouraged to suspend their suspension of disbelief by illusion-breaking devices. For example, V's video message appears to be directed at the viewer as V gazes directly into the camera. There are a number of prominent invisible cuts that draw attention to the editing process, disrupting the codes of point-of-view editing. Equally anti-illusionistic is the reappearance of dead

people at the end of the movie, which was not generally coded as allowing su-
pernatural elements.

The comment that 9/11 looked "like in the movies," repeated by countless
eyewitnesses and newspapers, both reproaches movie violence for being the
template of real violence - which in turn is a common charge against any movie
violence - and lets real violence recede to the level of virtual violence. The visual
media itself is part of the "event 9/11," first of all, because most Americans (and
many others) experienced the event on television, yet felt personally assaulted
and threatened. Therefore, this second-hand vicariously-lived element is an im-
portant part of the way in which we try to grasp the event 9/11.

Cinema is recurrently accused of imagining and disseminating violent pat-
terns as solutions to conflicts. With regards to 9/11, cinema was charged with
having pre-imagined the event. In *V for Vendetta*, self-referential devices re-
spond to this alleged implication. Some of these self-references are fairly
straightforward, as when Evey is watching the swashbuckler movie or the way in
which V creates his persona out of various violent cinematic predecessors.

The aspect of storytelling, and the subjective and mediated aspects of narra-
tion and performance are generally a prominent topic in *V for Vendetta*. If these
narratives are conflicting, no authorial agency steps in to order them; apparently,
ambivalences must be tolerated. The film features various forms of narration on
an intradiegetic level, e.g. the narratives told in voice-over of various characters,
the doctor's diary and Valérie's autobiographical letter, and V's videotape. Of
these, the video announcement and the TV comedy show are the most obvious
self-referential examples.

Esthetically speaking the scene of V's video announcement of his upcoming
terrorist attack is pure theatre and self-reflexively throwing back the glance of
the audience. V is sitting in front of curtains, he is wearing his mask – a theatre
prop that allows him to be continuously smiling, hiding his true self and connot-
ing a variety of cultural references, from Greek tragedy, to Venetian carnival, to
the split personality of superheroes, or to previous silver screen heroes. V is
enunciating a speech full of rhetorical finesse in the pleasing voice of a profes-
sional stage actor. V's polite and educated manner of speaking provides a stark
contrast to the martial rhetoric of his enemies. This performance recalls the sui-
cide bombers' farewell as well as Bin Laden's video messages. V spreads fear by
his announcement that in a year *"I will come and get you"* (even though this
threat is aimed at the government, not the people), giving everyone ample time
to become hysterical.

The TV comedy show in *V for Vendetta*, ostensibly aimed at Chancellor
Sutler, does in fact also attack V. In the show, the Chancellor and V are depicted
as an interchangeable figures. This captures the questions at the core of the movie:

Who is the terrorist here? In a totalitarian or fascist system, is the terrorist not morally in the right? Who decides on the terminology? Moreover, the TV slapstick show visually and in its silent-film characteristics recalls Chaplinesque humor, establishing an intertext to his milestone movie *The Great Dictator*. This movie's controversial take of making fun of Hitler was continued by a strain of "funny Holocaust films" such as *Life is Beautiful*. Discussing a range of these films, Sander L. Gilman points out that laughter might be less a problem of principle but of context and subject-object relations: Who is laughing in these films, who is the object of the laughter, is it diegetic laughter or laughter by the audience? Both Freud's idea of laughter as valve for unsavory drives and "Thomas Hobbes's notion that humor is in complex ways wedded to notions of power or the illusion of power" work for this scene in *V for Vendetta*. The diegetic audience is laughing at the chancellor and at V, using humor as "a weapon aimed at those perceived as weaker or stronger than oneself" (Gilman 281). The murder of the comedian in the film is evidence to the danger that lies in laughter as a tool of resistance, to the power in fearless and irreverent popular culture. In a carnivalesque move, the TV comedy show in *V for Vendetta* turns dominant reality upside down, marking "the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions" (Fiske 241). The show is insolent, juicy and risqué, equalizing what is usually presented in dignified, aloof heights. The argument against this approach fears to trivialize, accommodate and commodify the horror. Those subscribing to the "school of laughter"-method claim that there is an enormous liberating potential in laughter, fending off any kind of sublime enshrinement and taking the "remote" government down a peck or two (Parenti 128).

To summarize, the audience of *V for Vendetta* needs to endure the ambivalences connected to the blowing up of a symbolic building. Narrating or performing stories is a frequent element in the film. These stories' subjective aspect is highlighted. V's video announcement and the TV show in particular draw attention to the role of the media in disseminating or resisting fear.

2.1.4   Résumé for *V for Vendetta*

Instead of straightforwardly discarding some forms of violence and absolving others, *V for Vendetta* presents various kinds of violence and points out their similarities. The impact of the protagonist's violence is dampened by its contrast to state-perpetrated terrorism. V's terrorism is a reaction to and outcome of state terrorism. The first section (2.1.1) examined how the narrative of *V for Vendetta* evokes popular justifications for the use of terrorist violence, ranging from the

myth of the vigilante to self-defense, Just Revolution and tyrannicide. These ideas have been used under various political prefix, and the film opens a whole spectrum on their ambivalent history. Instead of flat-out rejecting any of these frameworks, the film encourages the audience to engage with these ideas and the ambivalences they contain. By setting up semantic codes such as the vigilante figure in V (2.1.1.1), the film signals to its audience the syntactic expectation that the narrative will "[gratify] the audience's own aggressive wishes, conscious or unconscious" (Cawelti, qtd. in Saunders 37).

With regards to the visualization of violence, the way in which V beautifies the spectacle of blowing up symbolic buildings – with music, fireworks – point to conceptualizations of terrorism as art as well as to the implication of cinema in this particular form of scopophillic pleasure. The visualization of torture in the film was examined in relation to voyeurism (2.1.2.1). The film attempts to circumvent this problem by non-fetishistic kind of editing and framing the tortured subject and by the invocation of "real" images. The torture scene evokes themes and justifications that resonate in the contemporary political climate, such as justifying torture by calling it the equivalent of liberation.

By withholding crucial narrative information in the torture scene, the viewer is led to engage with the ambivalence of the concepts V incarnates if not outright tricked into allegiance with a terrorist. The fact that V uses violent methods such as terrorism and torture shifts implied positions of alignment and potential allegiance (cf 2.1.2.2) away from V and the ideological norms that he stands for. More than his use of terrorism, which is justified in traditional ways – as a last resort, as self-defense, for the public good –, V's use of torture comes as a shock to the audience.

The film's hero avails himself of the same methods as his opponents - torture, terrorism, endangering the innocent. V was literally created by the forces he seeks to destroy, incarnating Derrida's autoimmunitary process in which we reproduce the very thing that we seek to oppress and deny (qtd. in Borradori 95). In more mundane words, the narrative seems to fictionalize the question: How to fight violence with violence, without becoming what one fights against? The main protagonists stand for two ways of reacting to violence: Where V sets out for revenge, Evey forgives the one who wronged her. Evey's development illustrates the behavioral dilemma at the core of the film: How to respond to violence? Is it possible to be decent against someone who is indecent?

As V is a composition of cinematic predecessors, the ambivalences of and disappointment in his character reflect back on our own culture. In this ambivalent figure of revenge and destruction, the Wachowski brothers fulfilled Zizek's call to "ask the question of how we ourselves who exert justice are involved in what we are fighting against" (Zizek, "Desert"). V is not an alien "Other" but

"one of us," and his self-fashioned character refers to literary or cinematic predecessors (cf.2.1.2.3). The fact that V creates his persona from cinematic sources constitutes a self-referential gesture which points to the role of cinema in perpetuating formulas of violence.

V for Vendetta pairs historical references with fairly explicit critique of contemporary politics, embedded in a dystopian narrative. Taken together, these techniques justify and encourage a political reading. Moreover, by combining historical and contemporary references (2.1.3.1), the film frames terrorism as repetitive and historical phenomenon in our world. Where 9/11 has often been cast as a singular, world-changing event, as "something new in the world" (Corey 155), described as "being beyond experience, outside history" (Anderson 9), *V for Vendetta* aligns historical, fictional and contemporary terrorism.

V for Vendetta fictionalizes the battle over terminology and language in many ways, embedding semantic instabilities (terrorist/hero), highlighting various forms of narration, castigating the complicity of the media in legitimizing forms of violence. Through this emphasis, the film encourages media savyness in the viewer. Narrating or performing stories is a frequent element in the film, and the subjective aspect of these stories is highlighted. V's video announcement and the TV show in particular draw attention to the role of the media in disseminating or resisting fear. (2.1.3.2). *V for Vendetta* introduces aspects that reflect on charges made against the movies after 9/11. Explicit references to contemporary politics and in particular the reenactment of iconic images can be interpreted as a response to charges concerning a perceived shift in the relation of virtuality and reality. These images mimic the "intrusion of the real." Pairing comic codes or artificial techniques such as CGIs with highly referential images arguably disturb the passive gaze on and consumption of images of violence Sontag deplored in her work (Sontag, "Regarding the Pain" and "On Photography").

2.2   Narrating Violence in *Munich*

The exposition of *Munich* shows the kidnapping of the Israeli athletic team by the Arab terrorist group "Black September" during the Olympic games in Munich 1972. The whole world is watching on television as the rescue mission goes awry, terrorists and hostages are killed. *Munich*'s hero Avner is asked to head a secret Israeli revenge squad to carry out retaliatory assassinations against the architects of the attack. Eager to prove himself and haunted by the Munich events, Avner accepts. The group is successful in killing seven of their eleven assigned targets. Over the course of their mission, they begin to question the righteousness and the efficiency of their actions. Expected to carry out this mission in blind loyalty, they are not presented with further evidence on the guiltiness of their targets. Most importantly perhaps, their actions incite vicious retaliatory violence. Finally, the group disintegrates; its members are killed or commit suicide. Increasingly paranoid, suspicious of his own government, and anxious for the safety of his family, Avner takes his wife and daughter to New York. At the end of the film, he will stay in the United States. Directed and produced by Stephen Spielberg, the film builds on the terror attacks during the Summer Olympics in 1972 yet the primary source for its narrative is George Jonas' novel *Vengeance* about the retaliatory mission. Released in 2005 and subsequently nominated for five academy awards, the film immediately incited much controversy.

   Munich questions the U.S. response to 9/11 by raising profound questions on the nature of terrorism and how to react to this kind of violence. The first section on this film examines the two prominent forms of violence encountered in the film: terrorist attacks and targeted killings as response. Terrorist violence will here be considered in their relation to the media, as the film foregrounds this aspect. The narrative focus of *Munich* is on the response to acts of terrorism. The elaborate justifications given to legitimize this response will be scrutinized with the help of Just War Theory as well as the cultural concepts of a savage war.

   The second section is devoted to the narrative devices used in response to the aesthetic difficulties in appropriately depicting and narrating terrorist attacks (2.2.2). The focus will be on the visualization of terrorist violence in *Munich*'s intricate flashback structure. Moreover, the characterization of heroes and enemies, focalization and the function of the film's generic codes for the narration of violence will be examined.

   The third section examines how the film establishes the relation to contemporary times and how *Munich* responds on an aesthetic and narrative level to the challenges of narrating 9/11 (2.2.3).

2.2.1   Types of Violence

2.2.1.1   Terrorism and the Media

Munich presents a historical case of terrorism, the hostage drama at the Summer Olympics in Munich 1972, as the beginning of a cycle of violence which, to this day, ravages the Middle East.[13] The Munich events are framed as trigger and cause for the ensuing violent events, i. e. the response to this act. The time frame of the story thus ranges from the terrorist attacks on the Olympic village in 1972, to the film's last image of the Twin Towers, which evoke the 9/11 attacks. No justification or explanation is given for terrorism. Compared to the intense engagement with the motives and justifications of the avengers, the terrorists' causes are mentioned only in passing, as one voice amongst many contradicting and overlapping voices heard in the media snippets.

The expository beginning of *Munich* introduces the viewer to what is at stake. After a short reenactment of the assault, there is a cut to a fairly long "media scene," which shows less the terrorist attacks themselves but the reporting on the events. The camera glides past nervously rambling newspeakers; the big movie screen is filled with many television screens, the soundtrack consists of a cacophony of perspectives and languages accompanying shots of people around the world watching the crisis on TV. The scene highlights the existence of different perspectives on the same event, and the extent to which the event being constructed, translated, transmitted, and compared by these different audiences in a cacophony of perspectives, reactions, and languages. Moreover, the scene emphasizes the visual aspect and global reach of the attack and the media's unwitting complicity through disseminating information as inconsiderate proliferation of images sabotaged the first rescue attempt.

Munich depicts both terrorism and counter-terrorist activity as a form of communication. The terrorists have successfully sought the limelight of publicity, communicating their existence to the world. Israel reacts to the Munich massacre with targeted killings; in return, the Israeli embassy is attacked with letter bombs. As one protagonist wryly comments, "*it's a response then. They're talking to us: it's a dialogue.*" In *Munich*, language or speech itself is erased from this "dialogue" of increasing stages of violence.

By foregrounding the communicative and media-translated aspects of terrorism, *Munich* illustrates several important points: a) that the goal of terrorism

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13 Obviously, the frame for this cycle of violence could also have been the Holocaust, the formation of Israel, or the situation/conditions in the Palestinian territories.

is to target an audience by far larger than its immediate victims; b) that the purpose of terrorism is therefore psychological, the "the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear in the attainment of political change […] thus undeniably a form of psychological warfare" (Hoffman); c) that the media plays an important role in this terrorist strategy.

The core information of the exposition scene is that terrorism is a media-savvy, staged act. Terrorist events are choreographed to attract media and press attention. The successful terrorist act must be spectacular, out of the ordinary, commanding and channeling worldwide attention. The media plays an important part in terrorism – in constructing perception of a conflict, and the legitimacy of its participants: "How the media reports on terrorism directly relates to how the actors and the act are perceived as "the term 'terrorism' is conventionally related to the question of legitimate political activity and to the concept of practical rationality." (Schlesinger 17). The media scene at the beginning of the film thus responds to the problem that media outlets are implicated in the acts of terror themselves - as players, pawns of the terrorists, parasites, as part of the terrorist strategy.

Schlesinger examines the criticism of free media reporting as having a "contagion effect" (Schlesinger 22): "The idea that mass-mediated violence must somehow have deleterious effects" is recurrent, and examined by various disciplines; the results, Schlesinger points out, remain inconclusive (Schlesinger 15). Nevertheless, the assumptions underlying this argument - "that liberal democracies are very vulnerable and they do not censor news; that the media are willing victims of terrorist propaganda and function as open conduits for such views; that media coverage has a 'contagion effect'" (Schlesinger 22) - appears to be as alive today as in 1991 when Schlesinger wrote these words.[14]

The argument that media reporting can help the enemy – here, help the terrorists to send a message to the world, a symbiosis between terrorists and the mass media – is an influential one. For if the end goal of terrorists is to spread fear and panic far beyond their immediate victims, they need media coverage for impact, to gain the maximum potential leverage needed to effect fundamental political change. "Although people often are tragically killed and wounded by terrorists in their attacks, terrorism by its nature is designed to have far-reaching psychological effects beyond the immediate victim(s) or object of their violence. It is meant to instill fear within and thereby intimidate or otherwise affect the behavior of the terrorists' target audience" (Hoffman). 500 million TV viewers were watching the Munich kidnapping according to the acclaimed documentary

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14 An interesting question for further research would be whether these discussions on the role and implication of the media are not becoming obsolete with the advent of the internet.

One Day in September. "[T]he television terrorist understands primetime, the need to escalate his deed, to manipulate the media, to reach the masses," writes Dr. J. Bowyer Bell of the Institute for War and Peace Studies, at Columbia University in 1978 and goes on to enumerate the conditions for "media manipulation […] there should be a good locale with communications facilities, such as the Munich Olympics in 1972. Second, the media need to be enticed by the prospect or actuality of violence. And finally, in order to hold the media's attention a terrorist 'spectacular' should contain frequent shifts of scene, as in, say, an aircraft hijack" (qtd. in Hoffman). While terrorists need the media reporting on them, they are also vulnerable to its system that constantly feeds on the latest events: "the media, constantly in need of diversity and new angles, makes fickle friends. Terrorists will always have to be innovative" (Schlesinger 23). Thus, the media is implicated, not only in the creation but arguably also in the escalation of terrorist attacks.

2.2.1.2   Targeted Killings: The Response

Moving on to justifications, the film offers many venues to legitimize the violence of the response. Consistent with a policy of swift and full retribution, the Israeli government orders the assassination of those responsible for designing the Munich attacks. How are these targeted killings justified in the film?[15]

Just War Theory provides a framework for discussing the complex arguments that are brought forth. The theory is not confined to war per se, but can be applied to any number of conflicts of a similarly violent degree. Haig Khatchadourian for example applies Just War Theory without further ado to examine the moral legitimacy of terrorism, political assassinations, and torture. Khatchadourian's project is to ascertain whether there are forms or circumstances in which any of these forms of violence would be morally justifiable, and he concludes that all three of these violent actions are always morally wrong.

To recapitulate, in Just War Theory the Principle of Discrimination and the Principle of Proportion, or *jus in bello*, prohibit the deliberate harming of inno-

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15 These justifications appear to be largely historically consistent, even though the historical veracity of Munich's narrative would be an interesting topic for a separate research. "[T]he Israeli-Palestinian conflict is replete with examples of tit for tat' violence, where particular actions are justified as a response to the violence of the other side. […] there have been a number of examples of suicide bombings being followed by targeted assassinations and also of the converse […] the justifications advanced for action in response to the violence of the other side is […] typically the claim is put forward that the other side must be made to pay a price for its violence or must be taught that it will gain no advantage from the use of violence. Alternatively the response is justified on the basis of deterring the other side from carrying out any further such actions" (Guelke 142).

cents. As these principles are always violated by terrorism, regardless of its concrete form (Khatchadourian distinguishes between political, retaliatory, predatory or moralistic terrorism), terrorism is always morally wrong. Equally, political assassinations are always morally wrong as they deprive their victims of a chance to defend themselves against the charges. The assassin is taking the law into his own hands, "turning himself into a judge of the victim's deeds or misdeeds, and arrogating to himself the 'right' to mete out punishment" (Khatchadourian 158). Furthermore political assassination is wrong because of its method. Khatchadourian's problem with political assassination is, by and large, "the way in which the would-be assassin attempts to achieve his politically motivated goals [i.e.] the precise way in which the act of killing is performed; namely by shooting, bombing, drowning, hanging, etc" (157). Finally, torture is wrong because it treats a human being as an object or a tool (against the Kantian imperative). All of these forms of violence are always morally wrong because cruelty is always wrong: "it is wrong in any circumstances to inflict avoidable or unnecessary pain or suffering […] that physical and mental cruelty is morally wrong." (Khatchadourian 157) Most importantly, these forms of violence are ethically wrong for they violate their victims' "human rights to be treated as moral persons" (Khatchadourian 136). Instead of a categorical right to life, Khatchadourian postulates one supreme human right, the right to be treated as a "moral being," not as a thing or object. This right cannot be overridden or waived; it is inalienable (170).

Contrary to Khatchadourian's categorical rejection of these methods, the film explores a number of venues to justify the targeted killings: a) revenge or retaliation b) deterrence, c) the savage war myth. Each of these will now be examined in turn.

Obviously, the targeted killings constitute a response to the *Munich* attacks, but are they merely retribution or not also an act of revenge? This difference between revenge and retribution is crucial, points out Gilbert, for revenge is an emotionally motivated concept that can per definition never be satisfied. Both parties estimate the insult and possible payback differently; therefore, there is "no measure of what constitutes fair payment" (Gilbert 75). By contrast, retribution can annul the crime, but only if both sides accept the crime and the punishment: "If both parties accept the code and acknowledge the system of enforcement then there can be closure, which is what a retributive account of punishment often stresses: to punish: 'is to annul the crime [n]o such closure is possible […] in the case of revenge" (Gilbert 75). Reflected in the film is the emotional, personal involvement of the men in Avner's group. When a member of his group asks: *"When it is enough? Will you stop with the 11th?"* these questions directly

relate to the problems inherent in the concept of revenge, i.e. how to measure its achievements, when it suffices (Gilbert 75).

Avner and his men have the mission to kill those eleven Palestinian men who allegedly had their hands in designing Munich; those who actually did the dirty work died during the botched rescue mission. Their targets are therefore chosen as an act of deterrence, as they might repeat their acts. Deterrence and retaliation as frame of justification are also evoked in a joke told by Avner's men after their first successful killing: *"The angels are rejoicing because the Egyptians have just drowned in the sea. And God says, why are you celebrating? I've just killed a multitude of my children. And the angels responded: Because when the people hear what happened to the Egyptians they'll understand your point: don't fuck with the Jews."* In the film, deterrence is most clearly stated by Prime Minister Golda Meir: *"Forget peace for now. We have to show them we're strong."* Moreover, the film references the Holocaust on several occasions, e.g. when Prime Minister Meir reflects that they are *"ambushed and slaughtered again ... while the rest of the world is playing games ... and dead Jews in Germany and the world couldn't care less."* This builds on the audience's prior knowledge and explains the critical importance for the state of Israel to appear strong as a form of deterrence.

In the cultural field, the savage war myth offers an influential, historically developed concept to justify violence. Slotkin has demonstrated the pervasive influence of the savage war myth. In his classic Gunfighter Nation, he carves out the origins of the myth in 17th century frontier society and traces the myth through the ages. The savage war myth is preferredly used both in products of popular entertainment and in the discourse on various real conflicts, such as the war in the Philippines (Slotkin, "Gunfighter" 106; Judis 54), the Pacific War Theatre of World War II or the Vietnam war. Slotkin describes the appliance of the myth in the quintessential (World War II) infantry combat film *Bataan*: "this new kind of war (insists) on showing us the harsh and 'dirty' fact of defeat; the enemy's 'dirty' savagery; and the necessity of our learning to match savagery with savagery to achieve victory." (Slotkin, "Gunfighter" 321).

The core idea of the savage war myth claims that the enemy forces us to "fight dirty;" otherwise, our accomplishments would turn into our weaknesses and eventual downfall, abused by an enemy who is not applying humanist standards.

The savage war narrative involves a battle to the death between a "primitive" and a "civilized" side. Initially, the "primitive race" enjoys the advantage of ruthlessness. Having provoked the battle by an atrocity, they have demonstrated to be beyond the moral pale. This advantage is bridged with the appearance of the hero, "the man who knows Indians" (Slotkin, "Gunfighter" 14). He is

a figure who can combine the civilized virtues of his own people with the primitive capacity for lawless violence of his foes. The civilized party is eventually victorious and spiritually and morally regenerated by its symbolic infusion of "primitive" energy. Not surprisingly, this narrative was developed concurrently with the genocidal war against Native Americans; Robert Stam and Ella Shohat call this framework "extermination as morality play" (128).

In *Munich*, the savage war claim that it is necessary to "take off the gloves," the need to "fight dirty" is openly expressed by various characters: *"Unless we learn to act like them we'll never defeat them." "We can't afford to be decent anymore." "Every civilization finds it necessary to negotiate compromises with its own values."* The resort to similar methods of a dirty fight is expressed by visually aligning the warring parties (cf. 2.2.2.2). The savage war narrative emphasizes the enemy's racial inferiority, linking the "alien" enemy back to the quintessential frontier enemy, the Indian (Slotkin, "Gunfighter" 507, 446, 116, 319). This element is downplayed in *Munich* but it is not entirely absent. For example, the Black September terrorists - not the designers who become the victims of retaliation - largely shout in (often un-subtitled) Arabic whereas the Israelis all speak English. Accordingly, just the language barrier focalizes the viewer with one side, and frames the enemy as the unintelligible "other."

Subsequently, however, the sense of this savage war belief-system is put up for discussion. As the targeted killings continue, they are revealed to be part of or even set in motion a vicious cycle of ever-increasing violence. When this realization dawns on them, Avner's men begin to question the efficiency and also the righteousness of the killings, again in literal expression *("We are righteous – we are supposed to be the good guys!"* exclaims one of them). The justness of the framework is less a problem than the overall success or failure of the mission as well as unintended side-effects. The mission appears inefficient – expensive, progressing slowly, at high personal risk – to the point of being counterproductive. The other side responds with more violent action, more violent leaders appear on the scene. Even when they succeed, new leaders emerge for each one they succeed in eliminating.

The savage war myth as well as the principles of Just War Theory remain relevant, as attempts have been made to justify U.S. foreign policy according to these concepts. Besides the savage war myth, the Just War narrative, modelled on World War II (Stam 128) also concentrates on the evilness of the enemy. These popular narratives have preferably been employed in the real post-9/11 context to rally support for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. This has been reflected in cinema: "the bulk of mainstream American cinema since 9/11 [...] seems centered on a desire to replicate the idea of the 'just war,' in which military reprisals, and the concomitant escalation of warfare, are simultaneously

inevitable and justified" (Dixon, "Teaching Film" 115). Chapter 2.2.3.2 will scan some of the arguments brought forth to conceptualize the War on Terror as a Punitive Just War, i.e. the attempts that are made to stretch the Just War criteria to fit in the current agenda in warfare. *Munich* reflects both this conceptual confusion as well as the attempt to employ these traditional concepts.

To summarize, the film engages with justifying concepts of political strategy often brought forth in the discussions of political conflicts in general, and the appropriate reaction to terrorism in the Middle Eastern conflict zone in particular. As a cultural concept, the savage war myth is evoked and discarded.

Having examined these justifications, the following section is concerned with the narrative discourse on violence, especially the visualization of terrorist violence in the form of flashbacks. *Munich* delivers these images of terrorist violence with latency, chopping and allocating them over the course of the narrative.

2.2.2   Cinematic Narration

2.2.2.1   Flashbacks: Visualizing Violence with Latency

The violence of the retaliation, which takes up most of the film, grows to resemble more and more the codes of terrorist violence, particularly by the spectacular explosions, i.e. the use of bombs. Over the course of the narrative, there is an escalation in the retaliatory violence, from one-on-one killings by bullets to bombings to a visual warzone. Eventually, the last assassinations bear all the hallmarks of a warzone: innocent bystanders are killed, civilian houses targeted, and the two remaining assassins flee from the scene in painted faces that recall war camouflage. During these scenes, the imagery and fast-paced action, filmed with a shaky camera, and the visual turmoil all recall war film codes.

Terrorism itself is narrated in an exposition and three flashbacks. The film begins with a short fictionalized exposition - a group of men is being helped to climb the fence of the Olympic village, the men embrace, force entry into the quarters of the Israeli team, followed by a scene of shouting, gunning, and running –, followed by a cut to the media reporting on the events.

The first flashback pans from Avner, who is on his way to begin the mission, outside the plane window, following his gaze. Fade to a scene of the nervous terrorists rounding up the athletes, and how the latter attempt to defend themselves. One athlete succeeds at killing one of the attackers and is perforated by their bullets. Sad music drowns out the previously high decibel level of unin-

telligible shouting and cries. The image fades again, from blood splattering the wall fade to hazy clouds outside the plane window, in spatially and graphically aligned editing. Concerning its place in the main narrative, this first flashback underlines the danger that awaits Avner and links him to previous heroes, who tried to defend their peers.

The second flashback is nestled between two scenes of Avner. In the first one he meets an attractive woman, presumably a prostitute, declines her offer, calls home, cries listening to his baby daughter saying dada, and falls backwards on the bed. There is a cut to the Israeli athletic team as they are getting into the bus to the airport. Shouts are again overtaken by sad music, doors bang shut and Avner wakes with a start. He subsequently discovers his friend Carl to have been killed by the prostitute. In this way, the flashback is linked to Avner's emotional investment and personal sacrifices as well as the continuing threat he and his loved ones are facing. Pressing his fingers over his eyes, (we follow his mind's eye) Avner is aligned with the blindfolded Israeli team members, and a sense of melodramatic foreboding is created when the terrorist tells them, *"after this you are free, you go home or back to your Olympic games."*

The final flashback shows the culmination of the crisis at the end of the film. A scene of Avner making love to his wife and staring into the void is linked, by parallel editing, to the ending of the Munich massacre: the terrorists are shot, the hostages are shot, the helicopter bursts into flames, hit by a grenade. Particularly remarkable is the alignment between Avner's physically strained face and the grimace of one terrorist before he shoots the defenseless hostages.

To study the formal properties of these flashbacks and how they function in the narrative, some categories of Genette's highly differentiated narratological system prove to be helpful. Genette distinguishes qualities of narrative discourse along the categories of order, duration, frequency, mood and voice. Of these, mood has been related to point of view in cinema (Gunning, "Narrative Discourse" 463), which will be discussed separately. Voice refers to an implicit or explicit narrating agency for a given text. Interesting for the analysis of the flashbacks are those categories of Genette's system which describe the temporal relations.

The category of duration specifies the relation between the time an event takes to occur in the story in contrast to the time it takes to narrate the event in the plot and finally, on screen. Time can be left out or condensed, thus, duration is important to describe changes in narrative rhythm and speed. In film, duration it is one of the many properties of editing. In *Munich*, the hostage crisis is both narrated in condensed and extended form – a crisis that lasted days is narrated within a 90 minute film (screen duration) but by chopping up the content and thus prolonging its depiction, drawing out the moments of shock and terror.

The category of order refers to the fact that narrative discourse can manipulate the temporal order of story. Narratology distinguishes between when things really happen in the story (histoire) and when things are told in the *récit premier*, i.e. the first narrative. Among non-chronological order of narration, Genette distinguishes two types, *analepsis* and *prolepsis*, which find their rough equivalent in the flashback and the flashforward in film.[16] An *analepsis* – or a flashback in film – refers to a retrospective narrating of events or actions that have taken place earlier than where our first narrative is now.

A little confusingly, in the case of *Munich,* the film is named after and begins with the Munich events. Yet both in terms of narrative focus and sheer quantity of screen time, the first narrative is obviously the revenge narrative. The flashbacks in *Munich* are therefore not part of the first narrative. As *external analepsis* they "function […] to fill out the first narrative by enlightening the reader" on some information that was missing (Genette 50). The flashbacks show the impact of history on the present by referring to an even that has taken before the beginning of the first narrative.

The category of *frequency* is perhaps most important for the flashbacks in the film. Frequency describes the relation between event and narration: An event that happens once can be narrated once, or exactly as many times as it happened (singular frequency), an event that happens once can be narrated an unspecific number of times (repetitive frequency or repeating narrative), or an event that happens an unspecific number of times can be narrated once (iterative frequency) (Genette 113-117). The flashbacks in *Munich* tell one event, the Munich hostage crisis, in singular frequency. However, the whole event is cut and dispersed over several flashbacks. Each time slightly different units of the event are shown, until the closing images show the final terror of the murder of the hostages.

The way in which the images of the Munich attacks intrude into Avner's consciousness remind of a traumatic response: "Traumatic experiences both engrave themselves on the memory in a literal fashion, ever intruding and repeating themselves, as in shell shock" (O'Connor 89). Inaugurated by point-of-view shots, the flashbacks are linked to Avner's consciousness, even though the narra-

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16 Genette distinguishes analepsis in reach – how far back in time a flashback goes – and extent – how long the flashback lasts. Within reach, there is the difference between external and internal analepsis: An external analepsis refers to an event that has taken place before the beginning of the first narrative, thus there cannot be any temporal overlap between the two (Genette 48-51). An internal analepsis is filling out gaps within the first narrative, there can thus be repetitions, usually combined with different points of view: internal analepses "present an obvious risk of redundancy or collision" (Genette 50). These categorizations appear to be always a matter of taste, depending on what one considers as first narrative. Yet in Munich, there is no risk of temporal overlap in narrative content, which is why Genette introduced the distinction between internal and external in the first place.

tive content of the flashbacks present images which cannot be Avner's *personal* memory. As a secondary trauma victim, Avner is haunted by images of his mind. He creates the "missing Real," the absent images himself. The effect of wide-spread traumatization is intended by the terrorists and part of terrorism itself: "'the victimized,' not the 'immediate victims' of a terrorist attack [are] the indi-rect but real targets" (Khatchadourian 181). The distinction between immediate victims and more general "victimized" or sufferers should not diminish or erase the difference and intensity in suffering between those directly affected, the more attenuated national trauma and a worldwide response to a threat which is reflect-ed in cultural products and cultural memory: "certain traumatic responses are not limited to the direct survivors of the catastrophe" wrote Sontag with regards to the nuclear threat ("Imagination" 61).

The way in which the flashbacks can be considered an aesthetic response to some of the challenges of representing terrorist violence will be elaborated in the last section (2.2.3.1). To a certain extent, the voyeuristic aspect in the representa-tion of violence is undermined by the particular form of these flashbacks: The repeated abortion of their narrative flow interrupts the viewing pleasures of the audience and the repetitive aspect of this stop-and-go narration works to remind the audience that the Munich events were the cause of all the screen violence we are witnessing. At the same time, the narration is showing the processing of the event by slightly moving forward in the narration in each flashback.

A further function of the flashbacks is to align the viewer with an Israeli point of view: The flashbacks are linked to Avner's imagination and establish a bond of empathy with the avenging Israeli perspective. These techniques of channeling audience sympathy will be addressed in the next section.

2.2.2.2 Point of View: Heroes and Enemies

Munich was fiercely discussed in the U.S. press and has sometimes been per-ceived as Arab-friendly to the point of accusing Spielberg of being "no friend of Israel" (Engelhard). Despite the criticism of moral equivalency that is leveled against the film, this section will show that the film's formal techniques assure that the audience's point of view remains with the Israeli side.

Looking relations and allegiance by focalization are particularly important to channel our sympathies, and they complement a stereotype- or image-centered approach. To recall, the choice and scope of the narrative itself directs the view-er's empathy and allegiance to the Israeli side. A similar effect is achieved with the media scene at the beginning: Even though multiple voices and reactions are depicted, Israeli and Arabs alike watching the news, the scene *ends* on and with

Avner watching the eulogy. Most importantly, *Munich* is primarily narrated in an internal focalization with protagonist Avner. This internal focalization ranges from point-of-view shots to the dizzy, chaotic imagery of the war scenes when Avner flees in disarray.

The narrative switches from internal to external focalization in the flashbacks, with a camera moving of its own accord. In the first flashback, the camera appears to "look down" to a dead Israeli, bathed in blood, in a brief, graphic and shocking shot. These movements call attention to an overall authorial agency or source, and seem to clarify the general point of view of the film. Moreover, sad offscreen music accompanies the flashbacks: A leitmotif of a mourning song again seems to bind the viewer's allegiance with the Israeli side.

From the outset, the film visually and narratively evokes and breaks a Manichean structure of heroes and enemies. Parallel editing links the images of the dead Israeli athletes during a TV eulogy to those responsible for their death, the future victims, while their names are read out aloud and commingle. This technique reappears at the end of the film, when parallel editing cuts from the grimace of the terrorist to the physically strained and therefore distorted features on Avner's face.

The justifications employed by both parties appear similar. Both are driven by the same quest for a "home," in a nation, on a piece of land, as evinced in the one scene featuring a Palestinian voice speaking for himself. Avner and his group have accidentally been accommodated with an Arab terrorist group in a presumed "safe house" in Greece. After an initial action-loaded encounter of pointing guns, Avner and the Palestinian Ali are smoking on the staircase and discussing world events. Ali explains the motive and longing that drive him: *"that's why you European reds don't get it. You say, it's nothing but you have a home to come back to. [...] We want to be nations. Home is everything."* Avner's mother, a Holocaust survivor, had employed the same reasoning earlier: She chooses to ignore what Avner is doing and tells him that it is worth "*whatever it takes"* to *"have a place on earth at last."*

The methods used on both sides also appear similar. If "weapons are the essence of their bearers" (Hegel, qtd. in Subirats 175), what follows from the fact that enemies and protagonists employ similar methods here? Both sides use bombs, both work for governments on clandestine missions. When Ephraim encourages Avner to *"do what the terrorists do. You don't exist, you don't report home,"* the film insinuates that there is a relation between the terrorists and Arab governments similar to Avner and his men and the Israeli state.

Gilbert claims that the right to violence, when exercised by the state, is supposed to result in "the depersonalization of its exercise through the decision-making processes of judicial authorities and law-enforcement bodies [which

amounts to] the rationalization of revenge" (Schlesinger 9). That Avner's men should be able to restrain themselves to killing only those eleven they were assigned to kill is elementary to maintain *jus in bello*: "the scope and limit upon targets and methods that a soldier's role creates [which are] limited by the principle of military necessity" (Gilbert 86).

In *Munich*, the men in the group are personally and emotionally involved, one member of Avner's group even claims that: *"The only blood that matters to me is Jewish blood."* The other side deemed the Israeli Olympic team fair game for being Jews and an Israelis. Therefore, both sides tend to define their victims according to identity, amounting to what Frank Wright called "representative violence" where victims are attacked because they are identified as representing groups of people (qtd. in Guelke 142). When one of Avner's group is killed, they take out the killer, in an act of emotionally motivated revenge as well as an act of preemptive self-defense: Global politics are thus illustrated on a local scale.

The increasing brutalization of the men also corresponds to an escalatory structure of violence. Avner's group illustrates the human tragedy and ethical dilemma resulting from violent acts for those committing them. The men are increasingly brutalized and their inhibitions fall: In an early scene they had rushed to abort their mission to save a little girl, daughter of their target, from being blown up by their bombs. By contrast, near the end of the film, they are pulling away a woman shielding her lover in order to shoot him in front of her eyes. A climax of brutalization is reached when they kill a woman assassin and leave her naked body uncovered, thus denying her the most basic human respect. This scene ends on a long shot, the distance of which expresses the men's emotional detachment from their violence: The viewer has continually been sharing the camera's point of view as expressive of their protagonists' emotional state. Recalling Khathadourian's argument about cruelty being always morally wrong, the scene with the woman assassin is important to highlight the men's brutalization.

In contrast to the terrorists of Avner's flashbacks and concurrently with the increasing brutalization of the Israeli avengers, the Arab victims are depicted as generally agreeable characters. They do not conform to the stereotypes of the "alien others" in Avner's flashbacks (Stam and Shohat 108). To give two examples, their first victim is an old man who translated *1001 Nights* into Italian; Shot a dozen times by Avner's group, the last image is a man lying in his blood and the milk he had just bought, an almost biblical image, underlining his humanity, the cruelty both of the action and the fact that the group is celebrating their successful kill afterwards. Another victim appears to be a modern intellectual, who hackles with his educated, non-veiled and beautiful wife while their little daughter is playing the piano.

As the victims are taken one by one, each of them is given time and an individual face, the paradigms of the "mark of the plural" and in "colonial proportion" are not upheld. Stam and Shohat summarize these cinematic techniques as part of cinema's colonial and eurocentric heritage.[17] The "mark of the plural" designates the technique to have colonized people appear to be the same (Stam and Shohat 183), "colonial proportion" decrees that "many of 'them' must die for each one of 'us' […] But while 'they' die disproportionately, 'we' must believe that 'they' pose an apocalyptic threat" (Stam and Shohat 120). Contrarily, in *Munich*, the victims are individualized and limited in numbers. Stam and Shohat also point out that focalization usually serves to channel empathy in such a way that "the possibility of sympathetic identifications with the Indians is simply ruled out by the point-of-view conventions; the spectator is unwittingly sutured into a colonial perspective" (Stam and Shohat 120). While the viewer of *Munich* is linked to one party's perspective, the Arab victims are not demonized and the other paradigms of "othering" do not apply.

The focus on individual victims and tit for tat violence in effect also excludes those responses of the Israeli state which are most heavily criticized for hurting civilians. The initial Israeli response - raids on Palestinian refugee camps - is part of the plot, as this is mentioned in passing, but the information is not equipped with images for impact. Cognitivist scholars like Bordwell have worked of how the reader or viewer is involved in reconstruction processes, by filling in information that is lacking based on prior knowledge or experience, or by understanding the cinematic "language" or "canonical" story formats: The viewer posits a set of assumptions, makes inferences, is hypothesizing (Bordwell, "Narration" 36). In this way, the Israeli military response is also part of the story, if we accept the "story" as an imaginary construction that the spectator or reader creates while reading the narrative discourse of the actual text (Gunning, "Narrative Discourse" 462).

The examination of images has its pitfalls – most importantly, this approach and its political claim towards film is premised on an aesthetic of verisimilitude that tends to conflate "reality" and screen reality. Nevertheless, the image-centered approach is important for a film like *Munich* which so obviously evokes these codes, both in terms of images and through the good-bad distinction of its

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17 The authors argue that stereotypes are inscribed not only on the level of image studies, but by cinematic practices and techniques which privilege the dominant gaze, and what they call "the Eurocentric tendencies of the media apparatus" (Stam and Shohat 125). Stam and Shohat trace this development historically to the coinciding of the birth of both cinema and colonialism which resulted in an "imperial imaginary." Their bold critique of many liberal films applies to Munich: while these films furnish the 'other' with a positive image, appealing dialog, sporadic point-of-view shots, the European characters remain at the center and take up an in-between role (Stam and Shohat 206).

generic codes. As a docudrama, *Munich* draws on melodramatic devices, which leads the viewer to expect clear moral boundaries: The "central […] ideology of melodrama is its Manichean outlook: that is, its polarities of good and evil, vice and virtue, innocence and villainy" (Mercer and Shingler 85). The following section will consider how the codes of the docudrama – its melodramatic and documentary aspects – impact on the narration of violence and the film's politics.

2.2.2.3   Docudrama

The process of narrativizing - to change into a narrative's form -, or of fictionalization - transforming into a fictional narrative based on fact - necessarily limits events to one or a few stories and points of view. Any narrative must decide whose point of view is shown and whose is left out. For historical narratives that aspire to some form of objectivity, this presents a particular challenge. Even the best-documented historical narratives feature "areas of uncertainty" (Zanger 88), and the process of narrating history and deciding on a point-of-view become political decisions.[18] This perspective aspect of narrated History is inscribed in the film by its own genre: *Munich* qualifies as a docudrama, defined as "a dramatized film based on real events and incorporating documentary features" (Compact Oxford English Dictionary), or as a "movie dramatization of events based on fact" (American Heritage).[19] Docudrama faces complex issues concerning the relation of dramatic license and historical objectivity.

The fact that film is a representation and a product of art "does not prevent them from having real effects in the world […] "the inevitability and the inescapability of representation does not mean, as Stuart Hall has put it, that 'nothing is at stake'" (Stam and Shohat 178). This becomes even more urgent "in cases where there are real-life prototypes for characters and situations, and where the film […] implicitly makes, and is received as making historical-realist claims" (Stam and Shohat 178). The film invests in these truth-claims by its topic and generic format. *Munich* capitalizes on the weight of historical truth in the use of authentic footage in the media scene. Generally, the film builds on the crowd-drawing, seducing pull of films that are inspired by a "true story," taking pains to construct historical verisimilitude in setting and costume to create a realistic

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18 Munich explicitly refers to the power of narratives when the first Palestinian target explains that he translated 1001 nights into Italian because of the "relationship of narrative to survival."

19 Even though Munich builds on events which did happen, the primary source for its narrative is George Jonas' novel Vengeance.

"look" of the past. The end credits give further information on victims and survivors.

During the exposition, real documentary footage - such as excerpts from the original Peter Jennings' report – is combined with fictional footage. Gérard Naziri instructively commented on a similar technique in Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991), where authentic newsreel is combined with reenactments in such a way that the fictional is endowed with an inherited sense of authenticity: "eine Methode […], die sich zunehmend verselbständigt und letztlich in einer komplexen Struktur aus Flashbacks resultiert, die sich zwar von ihrer ursprünglichen Kennzeichnung als Fernsehbilder befreit haben, denen aber dennoch ein quasi ererbtes Maß an Authentizität anzuhaften scheint." (Naziri 246) The depiction of terrorism in *Munich* profits from such a pseudo-documentary style as well: The juxtaposition with real footage furnishes the images of terrorism with authentic patina.

Apart from a financial motivation, the docudrama has cultural functions. The genre mixes "realness" with melodramatic reenactment, enabling an emotionally safe experience for the spectator. The concern here is less a sound generic analysis but to pinpoint how the devices of melodrama impact on the narrative of violence in the docudrama, i.e. how the melodramatic sensibility interacts with the realness of documentary.

Melodrama is most broadly defined as "a dramatic narrative with musical accompaniment to mark or punctuate the emotional effects" (Mercer and Shingler 7). *Munich* features the punctuation of the moment of emotional peak with music in the leitmotif song accompanying the flashbacks. Sound always influences the perception of the image, and here, image and sound are not synchronized. This dislocation of visual and auditory rhythm, a typical device from war movies to express the sublime of the moment, purposefully contrasts the hectic movement within the frame and the timelessness of the slow song. Where sound usually inscribes the image in real and linearized time – as sound cannot play in reverse –, this song is played in a repetitive loop, a Leitmotif, hence its temporal progress is lost. Melodrama can be framed as a genre, a mode or sensibility, "dominated by a non-verbal aesthetic," or "muteness" marked by pathos and bearing the capacity to provoke strong emotions (Mercer and Shingler 84-6). The pathos in melodrama is derived from the fact that the spectator has knowledge that is not available to the characters themselves. This discrepancy of knowledge results in the famous tearjerking quality and a pleasurable and satisfying experience for the spectator (Mercer and Shingler 80).

For Seth Feldman, the central function of the Docudrama is as a "mediator in transformation of reality into mythology" (349) as the melodramatic nature of these films provides "explanations of an incomprehensible world to the disen-

franchised" (349). For the "intensification of emotional ploys" by melodramatic
devices is typical among the docudrama conventions. Initially successful on
television, the docudrama was again very popular in the 1970s, and there seem to
be remarkable parallels between that epoch and the contemporary climate: "be-
cause of political and social events there was a 'hunger' for factually oriented
fiction [that went for] events that had already achieved a central place in the
public imagination [slavery, Hiroshima in *Roots*, *Holocaust*, *The Day After*]"
(Feldman 349).

Similar collective needs have been observed in the post-9/11 years: Julie
Salamon claims that the flood of 9/11 documentaries testify to the desire to rein-
troduce reality into the event's unfathomable quality. These documentaries pro-
vide a "blunt reality that's missing from so many burnished visions of victims
and rescuers" (Salamon). *Munich* also offers something "real" - the assumed
veracity of the events on which it builds its plot, as well as the real documentary
footage that is used - from a safe distance of a historically contained and located
case of terrorism. Like the theatre audience of a Greek tragedy, the audience can
watch *Munich* from a safe vantage point, suffer in the knowledge of the irrevoc-
able tragedies that will follow in the narrative, as well as those that lie yet ahead
beyond the narrative frame, in the last image of the film: a shot of the World
Trade Center towers looming in the distance.

2.2.3   Narrative Challenges

2.2.3.1   9/11: Depicting Images of Atrocity

This last shot, on which the movie ends, constitutes the most explicit reference to
9/11. It is a "prolepsis," meaning that the image evokes a later event, external to
the time frame of the main narrative (Genette 67-77). The sequence before this
last image began with the final flashback: the killing of the nine remaining ath-
letes, which took place at an airport and included explosions of helicopters. In
the last scene following these images, Avner discusses the outcome of the mis-
sion with his Mossad superior and observes, "*There is no peace at the end of
this.*" Then there is the last shot of the Twin Towers, which works like an antici-
pation. Like a diluted form of montage,[20] these themes - the explosion, the dialo-

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20 Montage is an editing system opposed to Hollywood's continuity editing; it most famous propo-
nent was Sergej Eisenstein, who also wrote extensively on the subject. For Eisenstein, spatial and
temporal discontinuities were used on purpose to create a "collision" from shot to shot "since he
believed that only through being forced to synthesize such conflicts does the viewer participate in a

gue, and the image of the Twin Towers - are put together in the viewer's mind to spell 9/11.

To clarify, nowhere does the narrative establish or imply a *causal* link between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the 9/11 attacks.[21] The link between the several flashbacks to the Munich terrorist events and the single "implied flashforward"[22] to 9/11 is not one of causality but of related structure, resulting in a warning with regards to the response to 9/11 and where it might lead. This is why the narrative precedent and 9/11 are expressed in formally similar ways: *external analepsis* narrate the Munich events and a *prolepsis* point to 9/11. The core images of violence are not shown (9/11) or narrated belatedly: Where the last image of the World Trade Center does not show the visuals of its destruction, the flashbacks in *Munich* equally entail an element of lack, for the climactic images of the hostage crisis are withheld until the end of the film.

I have argued that the flashbacks respond to the problem of how and when to show images of atrocity, especially when there are no images of the event from the perspective of someone present "inside" the event. No one but the terrorists and their victims were present during the attacks at the Olympic village in *Munich*, and they did not live to tell their story. The flashbacks visualize images that are missing. Similar problems arise in the treatment of 9/11. Brottman points to the fact that while certain images of 9/11 were censored for political reasons (167), others were simply absent: As most people were incinerated immediately, there was little explicit horror captured in images. Scholarly work documents the efforts made to reinsert the event's essential incomprehensibility into known narrative formulas, often in the form of documentaries or docudramas. For example, Stef Craps analyzed how a docudrama like *9/11* attempts "to obtain mastery over trauma by rendering it legible in terms of existing cultural codes" (183). *Munich* responds to this problem of necessarily absent images - as all those directly involved in the historical case are dead - by depicting its terrorism in a pseudo-documentary visual style and the alignment with authentic footage (cf. 2.2.2.3).

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dialectical process […] not only perceptual but also emotional and intellectual" (Bordwell and Thompson 234). By calling these scenes "diluted montage", I am obviously disregarding Eisenstein's idea that this would create a new, communist, consciousness in the viewer and the fact that montage theory refers to an editing process where such a "tertium quid" is created from the juxtaposition of two or more images.

21 On the contrary, America is established as innocent third party – America's jazz music is the conciliatory proposal between the Israeli-German and the Arab team who find themselves unwittingly in the same safe house; in the end, Avner chooses to emigrate, to escape to America.

22 It is not a proper flashforward, defined as "an alteration of story order in which the plot presentation moves forward to future events then returns to the present" (Bordwell and Thompson 60).

In the exposition scene, real documentary footage is combined with ree-nacted fictional footage. In the same way, the fictional – the flashbacks – take off where any real images fall short. The cinematography of the flashbacks mimics a documentary style, which codes the flashbacks as real" or truthful re-enactments. Thus, the flashbacks fill in those images that are traumatically missing from the Munich massacres.

This topic of missing images is relevant for 9/11 as well. Reading the Mu-nich images from a 9/11 perspective is justified for as readers and viewers, we are always located in our own times: We can understand and change our pers-pective on products of popular culture, depending on our own social context. This argument has been made numerous times since 9/11.[23] This is why even the original footage of Peter Jenning's report and his final words: "They are all gone" can strike a chord and a mental connection to 9/11: "Events can alter how we read and, thus, alter the sense we will make of cultural objects" (Fedderson and Richardson 151).

Another link to 9/11 is established by the title "Munich" which in its brevity points to the semantic overload that a city's name, a date or an abbreviation can carry like a token. The opening images further cement this symbolism: like a giant memorial plaque, places and cities blink at us. Out of this memorial wall of cities, *Munich* comes to the foreground, as the other names fade. The initially white letters on black background change to a bloody red. Derrida claims that the brevity of the appellation 9/11 signifies the fact that we perhaps have no concept and no meaning available to us to name in any other way this 'thing' that has just happened, this supposed 'event' (qtd. in Borradori 86). The primarily temporal mark of 9/11 is translated in *Munich* into a spatial marker, but even the symbolic weight of the location bears a relation to the attacks on the World Trade Center. Apart from the date 9/11, there is the specific locus of Ground Zero. Like other places before – Hiroshima, Dachau, the Alamo, the Ia Drang Valley -, the locus contains the memory of the activity or event and the very names of the cities appear to be tied up with the event.

2.2.3.2   The Media and the Response to 9/11

Moreover, self-reflexive elements in *Munich* evince an engagement with the charges made against the newsmedia and the film industry for being complicit in the creation and dissemination of the images of terrorism. These charges impli-

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23 For example, Rich argues that the seminal The Battle of Algiers about the Algerian liberation of French colonial rule "has begun to look like a recruiting film for Al-Qaeda" (Rich 111).

cate the consumer of these images – the audience – as well. In the media scene of *Munich's* exposition, several television screens fill the frame, reporters are talking into cameras while the camera moves forward and past them in a tracking shot. Even the terrorists are watching TV. One hostage-taker soothes his nervous panicking colleague by saying, "it's just a show." These words mirror the sentiment of terrorism as "theatre." The scene highlights the parasitic aspect in the relation between terrorism and the media. Momentarily, the complicity of our gaze is reflected back to the viewer when the original footage of Peter Jenning's historical report on the events fills the screen. The media scene creates a dense structure of interlocking gazes. One shot reenacts one of the most famous pictures from the Munich events, a hooded terrorist on the balcony. In this shot, the viewer sees the terrorist standing on the balcony with his back to us. A TV screen that shows exactly this frame, in reverse image, takes up the other half of the frame, while a newsreporter muses what might be going on in the terrorist's head. The audience knows as little as the reporter back then as the film makes no attempt at explaining. The terrorist remains an enigmatic "other."[24] The focus of this scene is not the content – the viewer only hears pieces and tidbits of the news, in various languages – but the translation of the event in reality into the practices and discourse of the media. The images point to the extent to which the event is experienced in this mediated form, and the extent to which the event *is* or becomes the discourse on it.

To recapitulate, the visual media itself is part of the "event 9/11" as the media has a prominent role in shaping our perception and sharpening our knowledge of terrorist violence. Many differences notwithstanding, there is also a peculiar similarity between charges against the media and the charges recently made against film. Where fiction film was criticized for having pre-imagined the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the media cycle is criticized for its role with regards to reporting on violence. In both cases, the premise is that the realist visual format of the media and its relevance in society is influential in shaping reality, in creating copycat effects by its sheer existence and reach.

The basic narrative structure of *Munich* – an act of terrorism, the response to it and an implied escalation – can be read analogous to 9/11 and the ensuing events. Stripping the film thus of its historical anchoring can be considered as simplifying, a-historical and therefore questionable. This interpretation is nevertheless encouraged by the film itself and has accordingly been performed in countless reviews. Obvious and important differences notwithstanding, the film exploits the existing structural similarities between the two terror attacks: Like

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24 Interestingly, Spielberg had opted for a similar tactic in War of the Worlds (2005), a science-fiction film which can easily be read as directly processing the 9/11 attacks: In War of the Worlds too, there is "no effort to understand its aliens' motivations or psychology" (Vest 69).

the 9/11 attacks, the Munich hostage crisis was a "first mover," introducing a hitherto unknown dimension and scale of terrorist violence (Hoffman). Both events projected previously local conflicts into an international arena. The Munich hostage crisis, together with the hijacking of El-Al 1968, and the formation of the PLO has been considered the beginning of the modern international terrorism that reached its peak so far in the attacks on the World Trade Center (Hoffman). In both cases, media coverage played a pivotal and not unambiguous role. Memorable images were manufactured in a publicity stunt to capture the world's attention. Civilians and symbolic locations were used, intensifying the prevalent feeling of fear that ensued as a consequence. The targeted country took retaliatory measures. In both cases, the victims were chosen both randomly and for their symbolic value as members of an identity group: as Americans working in the World Trade Center or as Jews representing Israel at the Olympic Games. Each conflict also featured a religious element, and a pronounced asymmetry of strength between the two players. In this way, the ethical questions of *Munich* take on a general analytical moment that is instructive for the current counterterrorist war.

The fact that the film evokes a binary framework of hero and enemy (in Avner's imagination) and emphasizes the similarities of both parties (in the diegetic reality) offers to be read in the post-9/11 context. A Manichean rhetoric and Western-originated oppositions were preferably used to define one's enemy "wanted dead or alive" in the aftermath of 9/11 (e.g Wilson; Brown). Particularly the justifications evoked in the film resemble those that were employed after 9/11. Cultural myths of the Savage and Just War were used to frame the situation in a metaphysical narrative of good and evil locked in a savage war. Slotkin argues that the savage war myth is drawn on "when Americans feel most profoundly threatened, when they feel their identity, their 'manhood' or dignity, is imperiled by the moral ugliness and terrible potential power of a certain kind of antagonist. Indians were the original group to be identified as this kind of enemy" (Slotkin, "Myths of Choice"). The recourse to the Just War Myth is evidenced by the countless comparisons of 9/11 to Pearl Harbor, which is favorably narrated as monumental history in the form of "narratives of innocence and experience, coming-of-age rituals, and melodramas of betrayal based on the perfidy [sic] of the Japanese Other" (Landy 95). Attempts have also been made to stretch the Just War criteria to fit in the current agenda and warfare. Sketching some of the arguments brought for and against this development will help to show how *Munich* engages with these themes.

Obviously, Just War Theory can be attacked for imprecision or inadequacy. Derrida for example implicitly mocks the subjectivity of Just War criteria such as the "last resort," pointing out that it is part of the nature of terrorism to present

itself as the only logical response and as a last resort: "every terrorist in the world claims to be responding in self-defense to a prior terrorism on the part of the state" (qtd. in Borradori 107). Reflecting on the rhetoric of the U.S. government, Gilbert explains the administration's justification for the counterterrorist war as a punitive Just War: "the War on Terror should be thought of as an attempt to wage a punitive just war [with the] purpose […] to deliver justice. War is not waged as an alternative to criminal justice, but as a form of it" (Gilbert 100). Gilbert develops a differentiation between old and new wars to allow for a punitive Just War, as in traditional Just War Theory war is allowed only in the case of self-defense.[25] Yet the claim that the rules need to change as the nature of warfare changes results in a highly problematic approach.

Some claim that as warfare has transformed, the Just War Theory has become obsolete. The theory is considered "hopelessly flawed" (Crawford 6) and inadequate for postmodern warfare: "at the opening of the twenty-first century [just war tradition] shows some signs of having reached the limit of its elasticity," (Rengger 361) observes Nicholas Rengger and asks: "Would we be better off without this flawed and problematic survivor from earlier times in our new, technologically sophisticated late modern world?" (362-3) For Rengger, Just War Theory is worthwhile keeping in the sense of an "inspiring" tradition "that emphasizes reflection on moral and political purposes and choices" (363). In difference to Rengger's rather elusive conclusion, Crawford points out that the practices of war are always changing, and that "normative concerns affect at least the rhetoric of states, if not their conduct" (6). Therefore, Just War remains important as its principles "permeate the official U.S. discourse in the counterterror war" (Crawford 12).

Just War concepts are employed at the same time that they are deconstructed for allegedly inappropriately reflecting the current conditions of warfare. Both of these movements are reflected in *Munich*: the attempt to situate one's actions within the Just War logic as well as the struggle to depose of the framework. The film depicts an earlier conflict which faced the exact same problems as we have today. The conceptual confusion, the doubts and the attempts to employ known concepts are featured in the film in the protagonists' soul-searching discussions. Aligned with Avner's group, the viewer is encouraged to follow

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25 Gilbert suggests that in today's new wars the old frameworks do not work anymore: Old wars are between states and interests of states, such as territorial gain, whereas new wars are "a manifestation of the politics of identity" (Gilbert 6): One's enemy is defined according to identity. While a Just War criterion like self-defense works well in the old war concept, i.e. when applied to a defense of territory and sovereignty, it is controversial what is meant by self-defense between identity-defined players. As Gilbert defines the new war as a battle of values, it remains unclear what would constitute a defeat or victory or even generally, the end of such a new war.

these reflections without being offered closure in the form of an implied reading position for or against these frameworks.

Another way in which the film refers to collective anxieties and confusions in the contemporary climate is the motif of paranoia and conspiracy. Dixon attests a general state of paranoia and fear in post 9/11 America which was expressed in cultural products such as cinema: "In this climate of hypersurveillant paranoia, Hollywood responded with a wave of films that reflected the new public mood" (Dixon, "Visions" 70). Thus, the theme of paranoia can be read as a condensation of a climate of distrust that has permeated U.S. society after 9/11: "In the period leading up to and following September 11, 2001, a number of cultural critics have recognized what Umberto Eco calls 'Ur-Fascism,' a culture of paranoia that values sacrifice, obedience, the cult of the hero, and the doctrine of constant warfare […] the media not only reported but helped create a siege mentality, followed by a reaction of panic and consequent thirst for revenge" (Bell-Metereau 142). Eco's definition of Ur-Fascism resembles a laundry list of sometimes contradictory elements (as he himself admits), which are freely combined in real fascist forms. One of the elements on Eco's list that is depicted as problematic in *Munich* is "the cult of action for action's sake […] taken before, or without, any previous reflection. Thinking is a form of emasculation; disagreement is treason (Eco "Ur-Fascism") Avner repeatedly tells a doubting colleague to "just stop thinking about it," until he himself, who initially functioned like a machine, succumbs to doubts and grows increasingly paranoid: "an obsession with a plot [is] at the root of the Ur-Fascist psychology" (Eco "Ur-Fascism"). Avner's men begin to distrust their government and the information they are given. The relation of trust between state and those risking their lives - giving over their lives and bodies to sustain the purposes - has become dysfunctional. Never being presented with any evidence, the men suspect or fear to have been used by the PLO for "internal housekeeping", to replace the Palestinian leadership, not the terrorist one. For the audience, neither a consistent conspiracy narrative nor a satisfactory closure discarding Avner's paranoia emerges. The narrative justifies Avner's suspicions to a certain extent, but the tension is never resolved. There are many instances where the narrative leaves open interpretative gaps for the viewer as diegetic double-binds. Two examples shall suffice. Avner's men are killed one by one, and often both suicide, accident and clever assassinations are possible as explanations. When the French informant tells an already paranoid Avner: *"No harm will come to you from me,"* it is not revealed whether these are cryptic warnings (there is danger coming from somewhere else) or simple facts, possibly meant as reassurance. In this way, *Munich* reflects on rather than subscribes to these impulses of paranoia and conspiracy.

The brilliancy and functionality of conspiracy theories lies in their capacity "to restore a sense of agency, causality and responsibility to what would other-wise seem the inexplicable play of forces over which we have no control […] they offer a compensatory fantasy that at least things are still controllable by an all-powerful individual or group" (Knight 19-23).[26] Both paranoia and conspiracy manifest distrust of the "official version," a sense of persecution, and both concepts employ the "imaginative leap" (Davis 26), shifting the burden of proof to the other party. Similar cultural functions are assigned to both concepts. Conspiracy theories help to restore order in a collapsing world because it is "easier to handle the concept of hostile conspirators than to face the fact that no one is in control." (James 78). Paranoia is considered "essentially a crisis in interpretation […] At the heart of paranoia, then, is a battle to impose meaning" (Davis 14). Paranoia expresses the need for explanatory systems and safety in a chaotic world, the collapse of trust in government, reflecting a crisis in interpretation and a battle to impose meaning and finally the "desire to believe in our own inno-cence" (Davis 18). Offering explanatory systems in a vertiginously complicated world, conspiracy narratives therefore can be read as symptoms of a crisis in interpretation, of how to assess meaning. Politically, they have been framed as radical political thought, as self- or re-empowering counter-narrative.

2.2.4   Résumé for *Munich*

Terrorism in *Munich* is prominently narrated in the form of scenes of the media reporting on the hostage crisis. Thus, the communicative, staged, and psycholog-ical aspects of terrorism are foregrounded. The media reporting also illustrates society's implications, in particular the implication of the media in helping ter-rorists to obtain their goals. These scenes are self-referential: They draw the viewer's attention to the role the media is playing during terrorist events, to the creation and worldwide dissemination of news, and to the subjective aspect in their creation and reception (2.2.1.1). Moreover, the media scenes, shot in docu-mentary style, are spatially and graphically aligned with real documentary foo-tage. This combination serves to furnish them with a layer of being "real."

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26 Since Hofstaedter's groundbreaking work in 1965, in which he linked paranoia with „movements of suspicious discontent" (Hofstaedter 6), paranoia and conspiracy narratives have been read as as radicalist political thought, as as self- or re-empowering counter-narratives. The concept has been qualified and updated but remains connected with political radicalism, enabling popular engagement and articulate some kind of critique of the status quo, especially for those marginalized by society (Skinner 95-6). Certain groups seem to be particularly liable to conspiracy: the politically disaffected and the culturally suspicious (James 80).

Without discarding the framework of punitive justice altogether, *Munich* questions revenge as appropriate response to terrorist violence. While various well-known patterns of justifications are evoked in the film (deterrence, self-defense, retaliation, and savage war), the narrative focus is on the price of reta-liatory action. The narrative highlights the unintended consequences on a per-sonal and political level. Occasionally even the legitimacy of punitive action is thrown into doubt (2.2.1.2).

Apart from the media scene, terrorism is narrated in the form of flashbacks. The particular structure of these flashbacks performs several purposes for the narrative. Their frequency and their insertion in the first narrative appear to mim-ic traumatic repetition for the protagonist. For the viewer these formal properties work as a continuous reminder of the cause for the violence onscreen. They establish a bond between viewer and the Israeli protagonists. More importantly, they continuously disrupt the aesthetic enjoyment that could be derived from the representation of violence. Therefore, I interpreted the flashbacks as a response to the problem that the cinematic depiction of atrocity always runs the risk of entailing visual pleasure (2.2.2.1).

A Them-Us division, rampant in action films as well as a staple of the con-temporary debate, is both purposefully evoked by melodramatic codes and ex-pressively broken through narrative and visual devices. Parallel shots link the dead Israeli team members with the Arab targets. These do not fit the mold of terrorists. They are individualized, overall sympathetic characters. Hero and enemy employ similar justifications and methods. Thus, clear moral boundaries between good and bad violence, between victim and perpetrator cannot be upheld, which presumably accounts for the charges of moral equivalency made against the movie. The narrative perspective, however, remains with the Israeli side throughout the film (2.2.2.2).

In response to the charge made against visual media for being implicated in acts of terrorism, *Munich* engages with the responsibility of the news media rather than cinema itself. Both medial forms are considered tainted and impli-cated. *Munich* does not offer "real" images of the making of such, but a "real" narrative: As a docudrama of a well-known and well-publicized conflict, the images that are not shown but present in the viewers' mind are highly relevant for its impact, both in terms of melodrama and as a commentary or warning of contemporary politics. For the film builds for effect on spectatorial knowledge of events to come that the film does not show - the cycle of violence in the Middle East as well as 9/11. These images that are not shown but that are present in the viewer's mind are used very effectively to engage the audience. A melodramatic effect is created through this discrepancy between audience and protagonists' knowledge, e.g. the futility of Avner's mission for building peace (2.2.2.3).

Even though this is a story on the Munich events, this historical case of terrorism can be read metaphorically: The movie responds to 9/11 and its political fall-out by engaging with the U.S. response to the September 11th attacks. The Munich events are presented as a structurally similar, comparable case, and a – not causally related – predecessor of 9/11. The relation is unmistakably established with the film's last image of the World Trade Center (2.2.3.1).

By choosing a real and protracted conflict to explore the problematic consequences of punitive violence, to examine behavioral predicaments, the film equally reminds us of their real consequences and functions as a warning. This historical case of terrorism, and the enduring conflict of which it is a part, are used metaphorically: Israel's problems with terrorism are framed as a stand-in for the U.S. War on Terror. The film's main themes apply to contemporary discussions of how to effectively fight terrorism, or how to deal with unintended consequences, the counter-violence that is provoked, the idea that it is necessary to compromise one's values to defend them (2.2.3.2). The terrorist attacks and the response they triggered are depicted as similar to a great extent: ineffective, justified with the same logic, destructive for those who perpetrate them, and resulting in a cycle of violence. The narrative encourages the audience to question the killings, along with the protagonists and along with a conspiracy narrative that is never conclusively explained to be either true or imagined.

Thus, *Munich* responds to the visual and aesthetic challenge of depicting terrorist violence. If terrorism is theatre, we are its audience, and if terrorism relies on the media, we are implicated through the demand of sensational news. This complicity of the audience is mitigated in *Munich* by displacing the conflict. A structurally related but decidedly "past" narrative is presented in melodramatic form, which enables a safe acting out of emotions. Thus, concerning the representation of terrorist violence reminiscent of 9/11, the requirement of "good taste" is maintained by disruption of spectacular images and narrative displacement.

2.3 Narrating Violence in *Children of Men*

2.3.1 Types of Violence

In *Children of Men* (2006), infertility has struck the human race. The film is set in London, 2027. Britain is caught up in violent war-like action with guerrilla fighters; terrorist attacks are common; immigrants are being rounded up and penned in cages. World-weary protagonist Theo is asked by his ex-lover Julian to help a young refugee escape. Julian is the leader of the *Fishes*, a terrorist group fighting for immigrants' rights. Inexplicably, the young woman, Kee, has been able to conceive a child. Initially aided by the *Fishes*, Theo and Kee attempt to reach a group of much-rumored, never-confirmed benevolent off-shore scientists called the Human Project. The *Fishes* turn on each other, killing Julian and Theo's best friend in the process. Theo and Kee enter a breathless running battle between dissenters, terrorists, and government troops. The baby is born in a refugee camp which turns into a war zone. In the last images, in a tiny boat on the open sea, Theo dies and Kee glimpses the Human Project's research ship.

Directed by Alfonso Cuàron, *Children of Men* builds on a 1992 dystopian novel by P. D. James. The movie was released in 2006, and achieved a decent success at the box office, despite being virtually abandoned by its production company Universal. The film was an international and critical success and garnered three Academy Award nominations.

The first section (2.3.1) studies the prominent types of violence encountered in *Children of Men*. To qualify these types, Stephen Nathanson's attempt to find ethical grounds for privileging some types of violence over others is illuminating. Besides the forces of the state and various substate players, the cause for all the diegetic mayhem appears to be a biological threat. This threat will be read as a metaphor for terrorism.

The second section (2.3.2) first examines the visual narration in *Children of Men*, which prominently includes iconographic imagery and a number of exceptionally Long Takes. This emphatically employed narrative technique is read as an alternative to action film spectacle. Examining the narrative's focalization and the remarkably subjective camera will help to show where the audience's sympathies are channeled. Some of the most important ways in which the film disrupts cinematic codes will be sketched, such as shot distance and character relations. The search for authenticity expressed through these techniques has a large impact on the narration of violence. As the film's effects are largely built on breaking cinematic codes, some of the various generic registers that are drawn upon will be evoked in the analysis.

This final section will examine how *Children of Men* responds to post-9/11 politics and masters its narrative challenges by studying selected references to post-9/11 politics and the effect of invoking "real" iconographic images. Moreover, the film's visual narration reflects back on our media landscape in response to the charges made against the media (2.3.3).

2.3.1.1 Terrorism: The Fishes

Children of Men entirely dispenses of an explanatory narrative. As exposition, a bomb goes off, almost killing the film's protagonist. This film essentially depicts a world in the throes of all-pervasive violence, from terrorism, violent strategies of urban pacification and control, the vicious persecution of immigrants, to war and rebellions in the refugee camps. The motives of the various fractions – such as the briefly mentioned "Islamists" or the government itself – remain fairly obscure. The underlying cause for all this violence is presented as a biological threat of human infertility looming over the protagonists. A war theatre provides the context for the terrorist activity but terrorists are only one of many fractions. Information to account for the disorienting and dystopic state of affairs is fragmentary, sometimes contradictory. The diegetic world is as inchoate and confusing to the audience as to its protagonists. Instead of an illusory order, the diegetic world is as complicated and multicausal as our own. In this way, the narrative also presents a vérité approach, like the visuals discussed below.

A terrorist group called the *Fishes* is the one fraction that is singled out by the film. Its members are variously congenial or disagreeable to the audience, disparate in looks, ethnicity, age and demeanor. The film quickly establishes that there are disparate interests in the group when their leader and Theo's former lover Julian is killed by her own people. Some members of the group are obviously full of pent-up violence, fanatic, and cruel, others are idealists and helpful. As a result, "the terrorists" in this movie are not a homogeneous mass of "others."

As too little information is offered on this world and its players, *Children of Men* deprives its viewer of any concise model of justification or motivation. The *Fishes* claim to fight for the rights of refugees, and the persecution of immigrants in the film is indeed depicted in a way that borders on crimes against humanity. However, for lack of information it is difficult to assess whether the group's actions possess any legitimacy within Just War Theory. Even excluding ulterior motives, such as the featured fight for leadership, the *Fishes* appear to operate outside the realm of a Just War as they do not obey the proper rules of war (*jus in bello*). They do not strive to protect human life as far as possible. Sympathy

for their means is undercut right from the beginning when Theo is kidnapped, threatened and humiliated in unnecessary cruelty. Whatever good cause the *Fishes* may have, any moral credibility is lost when they kill Theo's friend for no apparent reason.

Neither is terrorism presented as an effective tool of revolution. The *Fishes* try to incite an uprising, but when this happens at the end of the film, it could be completely unrelated to their actions. The *Fishes* as well as the uprising refugee militants are apparently just one of many players in an entangled conflict, and the narrative quickly moves towards greater, seemingly chaotic, fighting among multiple fractions.

2.3.1.2   War

In theory, warfare and terrorism are often directly opposed to each other. Where war designates the fairly controlled use of violence between nation states, terrorism sets out to break exactly those rules of the game. Definitions of terrorism often emphasize its irrational, arbitrary nature – everyone can become its victim – whereas warfare is allegedly susceptible to rule. The violence in war can be judged or even held responsible according to laws of war and war crime put down in treaties such as the Hague Convention of 1899, and persecuted by institutions such as the ICCt.

Violence as depicted in *Children of Men* does not confirm this distinction. There is very little information on and no coherent narrative about the warzone which provides the background for the film's main narrative. It is not even clear to the viewer whether this is an all-out war – "The Uprising," as the *Fishes* proclaim – or a locally confined riot. However, the war is obviously asymmetric, as the forces of the state are fighting with military might against some form of insurgency.

In order to assess how the film's violence and warzone challenges conceptual boundaries, a theoretical approach towards qualifying forms of violence will be outlined. Nathanson sets out to find sound ethical grounds to condemn terrorism but approve of warfare under certain circumstances. His exploration of the topic is illuminating because he rejects both the common hypocritical attitude to either condemn only terrorism, by framing it in an essentialist way as an "especially immoral" form of violence (Nathanson 4) or to fall into the trap of relativism, condensed in the saying that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" (Nathanson 5). Nathanson's point is not to relativize the repugnance of terrorist acts but to avoid errors and distortions of moral judgement when it comes to violence (7).

Both war and terrorism attempt to inflict enough damage to convince an enemy that it should surrender or otherwise comply with the opponent's demands; both entail a communicative aspect: "Warfare, like terrorism, often has both a target and an audience" (Nathanson 12). Besides these structural similarities, war and terrorism both kill or injure or threaten to kill or injure innocent people. In the search for viable unbiased definitions, Nathanson marks this threat to the innocent as the most important element of his definition of terrorism (12). He thus pierces into the heart of the problem. For if war hurts or kills innocent civilians, it ought to be condemned just like terrorism. Nathanson writes off the two most common justifying schemes of consequentialism and double effect. Consequentialism assesses violence according to its outcome. This explanatory approach is dispensed of by reference to Kant; you must not treat people as means but as ends in themselves, i.e. you must not harm people for the "greater good." Double effect evaluates actions by their intended goals, not their actual consequences, and is therefore equally dissatisfying (Nathanson 17-29). Instead, Nathanson proposes the "bend-over-backward rule," which designates an active commitment to saving civilian life. According to Nathanson, this rule creates the crucial and sufficient basis to condemn terrorist violence, and generate a principled justification of a just and legitimate warfare (29-30).

As there is no background information on the war in *Children of Men*, the central point is that the warring fractions present an equal threat to our protagonists. The film combines the visual codes of a war movie with narrative information on terrorist violence. The theoretical focus on terrorist violence as the only inacceptable form and as essentially different from other forms of violence is thus qualified. There is no principled distinction in the behavior or the response of the fractions: soldiers, guerrillas and civilians alike get blown away, soldiers and terrorists kill each other and civilians. Arbitrary violence enters every frame. There are no rules anymore. Choosing a refugee camp as setting for the warzone is crucial to draw attention to the fact that war's collateral damage hurts innocent civilians. As this constitutes one of the prime moral criteria for condemning terrorism, the separation between warfare and terrorism is disturbed.

While the warzone functions as a template, dislocated from any real conflict, its structure and iconographic images recall recent warzones (cf. 2.3.2.1), which refers the viewer to real offscreen violence (cf. 2.3.3.1). Besides terrorism and warfare, there is a third form of violence in *Children of Men*, which provides the context for terrorism and war. Infertility is supposedly the cause behind the deteriorated state of affairs. This scenario of a biological and invisible threat will be the subject of the following chapter.

2.3.1.3   A Biological Threat

In P.D. James book *The Children of Men* (1992), which provided the inspiration for this film, the inexplicable plague of human infertility sets the scene for an exploration of dogma. The book gives some information on the sources of infertility, the background of the conflict, and the general workings of this dystopian future. All of these specificities have been cut for the movie version which does keep the threat of human infertility but turns it into an even less explained fact than the original text. This is why film critic Robert Ebert considers the issue as nothing more than a MacGuffin to propel the narrative (Ebert). In his commentary on the film, Zizek interprets the problem of infertility as a cultural metaphor: "The infertility Cuàron's film is about was diagnosed long ago by Friedrich Nietzsche, when he perceived how Western civilization is moving in the direction of the Last Man" (Zizek, "End of History"). In this chapter, I will propose yet a different metaphoric reading of the infertility theme, namely that the biological threat expresses contemporary anxieties and serves to contextualize the other forms of violence.

From cinematic socialization, the viewer might deduce that the cause of infertility is a disease, a sort of virus or plague. This resounds both with the film's overflowing biblical subtext,[27] and a cinematic tradition of depicting apocalypse (cf. Mayer 1-20). *Children of Men* features aspects of the "plague" or disaster movies. In his study on various cycles of disaster films, Stephen Keane argues: "Where disaster is an ever-present threat it invariably leads to a race against time" (53). The central feature of the disaster film, namely the focus on survival, is equally present in *Children of Men*: "As Diane Negra argues, for all their catastrophic scenes of death and destruction, disaster movies are ultimately about 'disaster readiness' […] disaster is combined with attempts at survival (qtd. in Keane 118-120). Keane defines disaster films as "innately passive and survivalist" texts, in contrast to action film's focus on activism. Unlike the disaster movie which typically ends with "images of rescue, redemption, reconstruction and reassertion, at both personal levels […] and on national and global scales (all-American heroes saving the world)" (Keane 120), the ending in *Children of Men* is much more pessimist or at least open-ended; the narrative provides no real

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27 Children of Men features a pronounced religious symbolism. The movie was opening on Christmas Day in the United States. The film's title is derived from a psalm, the Fishes recall the fish sign, part of Christian symbolism, and one of their leaders carries the speaking name Luke. Kee is a sort of virgin-mother: no one's quite sure how she could get pregnant in the first place: it's a miracle. A child is born. The Human Project can be read as an ark and the film as a modern-day nativity story: Kee gives finally birth among the poorest of the poor; mother and child having escaped to foreign lands. Kee reveals her pregnancy to Theo in a barn. There is no sexual or romantic relationship between Theo and Kee, but he protects her and sacrifices himself for her (and humanity).

closure. *Children of Men* exhibits aspects of the action film which does not contradict its generic roots in disaster movies. The term "action-adventure" was purposely created to account for exactly such cross-generic qualities of many recent films (Keane 55).

Like Keane, Jaqueline Foertsch works on the premise that events of a certain magnitude and the fears they produce are inscribed in art. Keane underlines how disaster films like *Titanic* prefer to blur the distinction between fact and fiction and how movies like *Outbreak* incorporate concerns surrounding AIDS or the Ebola Virus (78). Foertsch explores how AIDS is inscribed in what she calls "plague texts." This premise works for *Children of Men* as well. Building on Foertsch' ideas, it is possible to argue that the film inscribes the fear and threat produced by global terrorism via the metaphor of disease, in particular the virus. This metaphor of a biological threat corresponds to recent work on terrorism and the anxiety connected with both. There are structural similarities with regards to the way in which culture grasps terrorism in terms of certain diseases: from "bacteria [which are] easily thought of as alien invaders" (Knight 27), to the cells of growth which recall the "abject" disease of cancer (cf. Sontag, "Illness") on to the virus as a particularly popular metaphor. The following section will sketch this fusion of a medical and military or foreign policy discourse and its manifestation in popular culture, and then apply the findings to the text of *Children of Men*.

Exploring several diseases' histories and use as cultural metaphors, Sontag compares the "romantic" transcendent disease of tuberculosis with the metaphorical use made of cancer. Besides her exploration of how cancer is blamed on the victims - framed as a form of "self-judgement, self-betrayal" ("Illness" 40), a metaphor for "whatever seemed ruthless, implacable, predatory […] the barbarian within" ("Illness" 61) -, Sontag examines the political use made of disease metaphors. Cancer is described in punitive, military terms of invasion and counterattacks ("Illness" 57-64): "the disease itself is conceived as the enemy on which society wages war […] 'the war on cancer'" ("Illness" 66). While "no specific political view has a monopoly on this metaphor," Sontag explains how cancer is fashionably used to describe a radical and fatalistic enemy, "a worst case: implicitly genocidal […] the use of cancer in political discourse encourages fatalism and justifies 'severe' measures" ("Illness" 83-4).

It seems therefore no accident that Derrida avails himself of the language of disease when talking about 9/11 and newly emerged threats. Derrida compares the logic of terrorism to the principle of autoimmunity, which he defines as "that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-suicidal fashion, 'itself' works to destroy its own protection to immunize itself against it 'own' immunity." In both terrorism and autoimmunity, Derrida argues, repression reproduces the thing it

seeks to disarm. In his three "moments of autoimmunity," Derrida points out the fact that the enemy came from within (having lived and been supported by the United States), and that part of the terror of 9/11 lies in the future, in the events yet to come: "It is the future that determines the unappropriability of the event, not the present or the past" (qtd. in Borradori 95-7). In his final "moment of autoimmunity" he claims that this new enemy cannot be identified or fought according to classical war models as he has changed his relation to earth, country, and nation: "[the U.S. government] is incapable of identifying the enemy […] No geography, no 'territorial' determination, is thus pertinent any longer for locating the seat of these new technologies of transmission of aggression." Derrida identifies this new enemy as "an absolute threat whose origin is anonymous and not related to any state […] The relationship between earth, terra, territory, and terror has changed" (qtd. in Borradori 100-1). In the same context, Baudrillard diagnoses the September 11th attacks as perpetrated by a "new, 'fantastical' enemy and an antagonism that is everywhere and […] in each of us […] Terrorism [is] like viruses, is everywhere" (Baudrillard, qtd. in Mayer 6). These reflections are remarkable for trying to conceptualize new forms of terrorism in the language of disease, in particular through the metaphor of the virus.

A virus, like cancer, incites our own bodies to turn against ourselves. In its most insidious forms, a virus has methods to escape detection through constant mutation. The virus hides in otherwise healthy cells, and these infected cells can suddenly jump into action. Invisible to the eye and biologically between alive and dead, the virus challenges our most basic categories: "the nature of viruses in general erodes the conceptual clarity of the unshakeable difference between self and other" (Knight 27).

The virus metaphor has for a long time influenced popular imagination and shaped the academic and political discourse on terrorism: "even before the anthrax scare in the wake of September 11, high government officials in the United States were busily reinterpreting the terrorist threat in terms of bioterrorism" (Mayer 4). The viral threat as a culturalized form of future military or terrorist projects informs "recent popular science writing and military-strategical measures" (Mayer 15-6). The virus metaphor carries on a rich cultural and cinematic tradition of connecting apocalyptic disease with the well-being of the nation-state. It was for example popularly used in cold war biothrillers. Yet in these, the disease mostly entered from the outside, from some faraway country. The existence of the virus did lead to increasing supervision, but the threat could be contained. The virus nowadays, argues Ruth Mayer, exposes a different fear, which takes the form of a biological treachery where we fear to have become our own enemy. In the same way, Knight argues that the latest enemy image is modeled on the Internet and the virus. This new enemy is unspecified, "without qualities"

and threatening to rise up at any point (Knight 181). What was formerly the conspiracy-minded fear of being taken over mutates into a literal, corporeal paranoia, the realization that there is nowhere safe to hide, not even one's own body and the fear to have become one's own enemy. Knight claims that the result is a "risk society" where "there is no longer any sure-fire way of telling the difference between self and threatening other, between friend and foe" (28). New instable, invisible enemies (such as hackers, the biological and computer virus) have replaced communism or alien others as enemies, argues Knight.

These anxieties and threat scenarios are inscribed into *Children of Men*. The anxiety connected to terrorism, often expressed through metaphors of disease, is reflected by the looming biological threat of human extinction, a catastrophe of apocalyptic dimension. Where the terrorist group the *Fishes* and the soldiers are at least visually recognizable, the real threat within the film is biological and invisible.

The relation of this apocalyptic danger to nature is expressed in *Children of Men* by the way in which nature is visualized. Utterly silent long distance shots of largely empty landscapes disable any sort of nostalgic romantic environmentalism. Sometimes the empty landscapes seem even threatening by the low camera angles and bleak grayish-blue coloring. Having turned on humanity, Nature appears neither victimized nor a savage wilderness to be claimed by the victorious forces of civilization but almost alien, completely indifferent to human suffering, offering no repose.

Moreover, the fear created by new threat scenarios is inscribed in *Children of Men* by the persecution and harassment of immigrants and refugees. Where the invisible threat of infertility provides no point of attack, the refugees are a welcome "Other" to attack; They are "hunted down like cockroaches," as one character in the film puts it. On several occasions, the camera pans along cages with refugees lining the road, some having their faces covered. During a train ride, a propaganda tape against illegal immigration is playing (*"He is my neighbor. She is my dentist. […] They are illegal immigrants"*). On the bus to the camp Theo and Kee are smuggled into, stripped and kneeling prisoners line the streets. Inside the camp, the refugees are insulted and robbed.

The immigrants are dehumanized and framed as an external threat to the nation. Their mistreatment takes place in public, citizens are encouraged to sell out on their co-citizens, and the persecution of immigrants inscribes a fear for the health of the nation's body. In this way, their persecution recalls fascist history. In fascist ideology, genocide was undertaken as a form of immunology. The nation was understood as a living organism containing virulent micro-organisms, which, like pathogenic cells, had to be killed off. Hannah Arendt identified this

tendency to think and to justify a "politics of violence" in terms of disease and biology, modeled on the "live or die in the animal kingdom" (qtd. in Landy 98).

These ideas were neither confined to nor die out with the end of Fascism. As Sontag has shown, illnesses provide metaphors for various occasions ("Illness"). The rhetoric of subversion, infiltration, takeover, and spread is used both for diseases and for enemies in war. As diseases like the virus are threatening physiological and conceptual borders, they offer metaphors for the "other" inside one's body or nation.

Blaming an alien other is also part of a post-9/11 backlash. Mayer analyzes a speech by Richard N. Haass, then representative of the U.S. Department of State, delivered in the fall of 2001, in which he embraces the logic "that the infected body of the state can and must be healed by way of an expulsion of the infectious and infecting Other (qtd. in Mayer 5). Landy also points out that the tropes of disease and the "language of injury and trauma" were used in the 9/11 context (98). Apparently it is a typical reflex to shift the blame to some outsider in times of national crisis, claims James: "the ethnic category can become a comforting refuge, built as it is upon the maintenance of a boundary, which excludes and indeed prevails over 'them' – the strangers, the adversaries, the hostile others – construed simultaneously with the 'we' in the process of self-assertion." (James 85) Similarly, with regards to recent developments, Robin Corey argues that "Because immigrants are not entitled to many of the constitutional rights possessed by citizens, the U.S. government has been able to use coercive penalties, like indefinite detentions and deportations, against Arab and Muslim residents" (217). He links the absence of stronger protest against these developments to structural hindrances. Examining the role of the political system in fostering fear, he claims that the "forces [of] politically repressive fear" in contemporary U.S. civil society, discourage even moderate dissent (Corey 217).

To summarize, *Children of Men*'s theme of infertility can well be read as more than a MacGuffin. As some form of disease or plague, this subject inscribes the fear of an invisible, all-pervasive threat of apocalyptic dimensions into the text. Within the narrative, the fears connected to this threat are taken out on the immigrants. This in turn recalls not only historical persecution but also contemporary issues and anxieties. The metaphor of the virus and its border-threatening qualities correspond to new enemy and threat scenarios, in particular terrorism. While the virus/infertility theme is threatening for its very invisibility, other forms of violence in *Children of Men* are very visible and their particular visual expression shall be the topic of the next chapter.

2.3.2   Cinematic Narration

2.3.2.1   Visualizing Violence: The Long Take

Neither the visuals nor the narrative present the viewer with a coherent world view of clear ideological combat zones. Soldiers and guerrilla fighters seem largely like templates of a certain type conflict which features soldiers as representatives of the state, various guerrilla fractions, and those caught in between. Visually, the focus is on the consequences of war, its effects on people, buildings, and the landscape: displaced civilians, bombed-out houses, large numbers of refugees and immigrants cramped into a refugee city, civilians getting into the line of fire, animals running in between. The film's perspective is of someone caught in the crossfire, thus, the focus of the scenes is not combat, but ducking, covering and fleeing.

Instead of the typical heaven-hell dichotomy of war movies (Adler), there is no refugee in *Children of Men*, no peaceful home to return to from the hell of the front. The world has gone to pieces and no one is safe, nowhere. A fundamental criticism of most war movies is their tendency to lack or give a faulty or tendentious historical background, to create a story at the expense of a broad moral and political vision. *Children of Men* dodges this issue by unhinging its narrative from any specific, historically located conflict. Simultaneously, iconographic images visualize the war zone in *Children of Men*; the tropes of this war theatre are reminiscent of recent televised conflicts in the Middle East or the Balkans.

This technique of de-historization has also been considered critically in the sense that Cuàron makes a general statement at the expense of historical specificity "by stripping substantive issues of all but their iconography, the film's spectacles function as politics, its politics as spectacles," which turns the movie into "a cynical exploitation of the present complex geopolitical situation for purposes of cinematic showmanship" (Rowin). Yet this iconographic mise-en-scène is more than an exploitative spectacle. I will argue that the film offers aesthetic alternatives to the spectacular mode which can be read as a response to charges leveled against cinema (cf. 2.3.2).

For Michael Rowin, *Children of Men* is "the exemplary post-9/11 film for [the action film] genre" as this film is questioning "exactly what it is audiences seek in […] displays of action or spectacular entertainment," expressing "the crisis of and for relevant entertainment [after 9/11, as the terrorist attacks] altered American viewers' relationship to on-screen catastrophe." (Rowin). The fact that Cuàron drafted the script for his film in the wake of the 9/11 attacks (Henerson) supports Rowin's assessment that *Children of Men* is part of "initial, ambivalent

efforts [to determine] whether a humanity and seriousness concerning the representation of large-scale violence […] will be the new cinematic order or whether Hollywood will manufacture the usual entertainments in an updated guise." Rowin thus considers the possibility of a fundamental change in post-9/11 cinema.

Building on Rowin's argument, the Long Take in particular can be interpreted as presenting an alternative to the spectacular mode in this film. In order to pursue this argument, this section will proceed by defining the technique of the Long Take, analyzing two exemplary Long Takes in *Children of Men* and its effects, and finally, by comparing the long take with the spectacular mode.

A Long or Extended take is an unusually lengthy shot. It must be differentiated from a Long Shot, which refers to apparent distance between camera and object. A sequence shot captures entire scenes in one Long Take. The Long Take can be examined under the heading of editing or as an image-based unorthodoxy.

Mostly, the Long Take is considered as one of three basic modes of organizing story time: conventional classical point-of-view editing, the Long Take, and montage. Unusually long shot duration can be considered an alternative to a series of shots, to the point of replacing editing, which is why a Long Take is frequently allied to mobile frame and/or elaborate camera movement (Bordwell and Thompson 196). Yet for the purpose at hand, the image-based aspect of the Long Take is more interesting than its capacity as an alternative to classic editing. In *Children of Men* the technique can be considered an alternative to visual spectacle.

The Long Take as structuring principle results in a way of narrating violence that is different from conventional Hollywood action cinema. While the Long Take is not frequently used since the advent of continuity editing, Bordwell and Thompson point out that it has always been a resource for filmmakers (195-6).

There are four remarkable Long Takes in *Children of Men*, all of which are also sequence shots. Each involves sophisticated camera movements. Three of them concern action sequences – the bomb explosion of the exposition, the attack during which Julian is shot and the siege in the refugee camp –, the last one features a birth scene. Thus the film's most striking aesthetic strategy aligns, generally speaking, scenes of violence.

Children of Men commences with a terrorist attack as an exposition. Even before the title is shown, the viewer is introduced to the dominant themes and characteristic devices of the film. This first scene introduces the dominant stylistic themes: a Long Take, the emphasis on the shot rather than the editing, a highly subjective camera which moves independent of character movement. In the shot, the camera seems to be running back to the explosion, in the opposite direction of protagonist Theo, who is seeking shelter in the offscreen space. Lacking

any information so far, the completely unprepared viewer is likely to experience the shock of the expository explosion.

After the terrorist bombing of the beginning, the next case of terrorist violence is also visualized in a Long Take. This is a very complicated scene during which the camera repeatedly turns, swivels, and pans. The protagonists are attacked by a mob while in the car, they go into reverse and try to escape, two assassins on a motorbike follow them and shoot Julian. Theo disposes of the assassins by hitting them with the passenger seat's door, again they try to escape and are being followed by police; after a shouting match, one of the *Fishes* kills the police men. The camera lingers on the dead policemen, while the protagonists drive away. The third and longest Long Take is during the war-like riots in the detention facility. The camera is jogging alongside Theo, ducking, running, and seeking cover with him.

As a structuring principle, the Long Take exaggerates temporal longevity and spatial depth. While the Long Take is primarily temporal, emphasizing shot over editing, in *Children of Men* it exhibits a tendency to be related to complex camera movements and an emphasis on mise-en-scène. The scenes in *Children of Men* are highly choreographed. To make the film, special constructions had to be built to enable the complex camera movements the director had in mind, such as when the camera rotated within the car.

As sequence shots, the Long Takes in *Children of Men* allow for realistic and dramatically significant background and middle ground activity. Actors range about the set transacting their business while the camera shifts focus from one plane of depth to another and back again. Thus, the Long Take results in a different way of showing characters interacting in a social world. The Long Take adds temporal realism by foregoing the editing process. For this reason the famous film critic André Bazin championed the Long Take (qtd. in Orpen 79).

Finally, the Long Take engages the viewer. The viewer experiences shock by multiplicity and simultaneity (of sound, action etc) as opposed to linear, step-by-step story information. Its effect is a visceral, physical closeness and immediacy of action. The Long Take style arguably adds realism by foregoing the artificial editing process. The Long Take both effaces the cinematic apparatus – the unnatural cuts – and draws attention to it, as the long take disrupts our viewing conditioning and our expectations of cinematic illusion building. It has even been argued that the Long Take leads to a "democratization" of the viewing experience, as viewers are less guided what to concentrate on – by editing and close-distance shots – but choose themselves. This argument can be attacked as the eye always focuses on details, particularities; it seems to be true however, that the Long Take is related to less directed viewing.

2.3.2.2   The Spectacular vs the Long Take

In particular the Hollywood Blockbuster action movie is associated with and has relied on the spectacular mode. *Children of Men* features elements of the action film, for its narrative structure involves fights, chases, explosions, but the film does not fulfill audience expectation of being treated to the spectacular, at least not in its typical form.

The spectacular mode consists in "an exaggeration of the pleasure of looking," it is related to surface and foreground, refusing "meaning or depth" (Fiske 243). The image of spectacular disaster "permits us to stand back from it and gasp, a reaction of such complete uninvolvement, even superiority, that we stun ourselves into guilt by experiencing it as beautiful" (Pomerance 59). In her famous 1964 essay, "The Imagination of disaster," Sontag worked out the spectacular as a mode of presenting "the aesthetics of destruction." A sensuously and aesthetically elaborate spectacle of disaster allowed the viewer to "participate in the fantasy of living through one's own death and more, the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself" ("Imagination" 213). While Sontag's subjects were science-fiction films, the use of her analysis is legitimate as these films represent, she argues, "one of the purest forms of spectacle." Sontag claimed that science fiction films are primarily about the representation of extraordinary destruction and disaster, not about feeling, science, character or plot intricacy. Science-fiction film of the Fifties and Sixties reflected "world-wide anxieties" of and the inadequate response to unassimilable terror - the threat of collective incineration and extinction through the atom bomb: "the imagery of disaster in science fiction film is above all the emblem of an inadequate response," inviting a "dispassionate, aesthetic view of destruction and violence—a technological view," and inciting "a strange apathy concerning the processes of […] destruction" (Sontag, "Imagination" 224-5).

What all these commentators – Fiske, Pomerance, and Sontag– have in common is an emphasis on the disengagement of the viewer and on a surface and visceral pleasure that is derived from the spectacular mode. The spectacular invites disengagement of the viewer, an emphasis of the foreground, often narrated from a distanced and panoramic point of view, an aesthetic of the sublime. The Long Take, as it is employed in *Children of Men*, is able to change the aspect of superficiality and disengagement while maintaining an intense aesthetic bodily experience, thus creating a different sense of violence on screen by this form of narration.

Instead of enjoying superior knowledge and detachment, the viewer is on a par with the confused protagonists, both visually and narratively. The movement of the camera – tracking towards the action so that the protagonists vanish into

offscreen space – emphasizes spatial depth instead of surface. The fact that the camera is recording where the characters do not look anymore (cf. 2.3.2.3) works almost like hailing the spectator: *Look at this!* The audience is shocked from the very first scene on; there is never a preparation for the violence, building-up of tensions, cinematic codes that lead to a climactic release of violence.

The Long Take in *Children of Men* is employed for scenes of violence. The technique adds temporal and spatial realism and shows characters interacting in the world. Shot length as well as the camera movement can be read as an aesthetic alternative to and as a commentary on the spectacular mode. Instead of the latter's position of detached viewing, the viewer is kept close, creating an engaging and striking aesthetic experience. The following chapters will show how other techniques enhance this aesthetic experience for the audience. A number of cinematic devices will be examined to support the claim that *Children of Men* seeks an original aesthetic form in its narration of violence. To begin with, the narrative's focalization and the remarkably subjective camera channel the audience's sympathies with regards to those committing violence.

2.3.2.3   External Focalization and the Subjective Camera

To recall, focalization channels the viewer's perspective and attitude towards violence and those committing violence. The standard case in Hollywood cinema is point-of-view continuity editing. Point-of-view editing, i.e. the cutting from a character to what he sees and then cutting back to record his reaction, creates the equivalent of what is internal focalization in literature. In particular the reaction shot gives us information on the character's emotional or mental state (Orpen 26).

In *Children of Men*, there are few point-of-view shots. Mostly, the perspective is one of external focalization, as the audience is given less information than the characters have. With regards to the violence – the riots in the camp, the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks - the viewer is on a par with the protagonists' fragmentary knowledge.

This lack of overview enhances an experience of terror for the viewer. The audience is not clued to divide their empathy between the fighting fractions. Stylistically, this reflects the fact that terrorists, revolutionaries and soldiers present equal danger for Theo and Kee. The external focalization attempts not to privilege one side at the expense of another. In combination with other devices – such as shot distance and atypical character relations (cf. 2.3.2.5) – external focalization creates an ideological web that downplays the privilege main characters usually enjoy.

Nevertheless, the audience is clued to feelings of allegiance towards Theo and Kee. At one point we hear a ringing sound that Theo had been complaining about, thus our auditory perspective is in allegiance with his. Again and again, the camera draws our attention to the senseless violence, which Theo and Kee try to escape and do not employ themselves, and of which they become victims. Moreover, by the narrative trajectory, we are aligned with Theo and Kee. As they pass into the detention camp, we are on a par with the refugees, too. Theo and Kee, and by extension the audience, endure the same terror, anxiety, chaos and humiliation as the immigrants. Yet they also remain separated. Theo and Kee have had an outside view on the camp first, they have actively pursued entrance into the camp, they do not speak the immigrants' language. In this way, empathy is encouraged, but the immigrants' experience is not appropriated.

The external focalization occasionally alternates and switches to internal focalization with Theo. While there are few point-of-view shots, Theo's emotional state is expressed in other ways. For example, after his ex-wife Julian is shot in the car, the visuals on the screen express Theo's dislocation. The image seems to collapse, as Theo is leaning against a tree, turning away from prying eyes – a fishbowl lens captures his sense of a world falling in, the high bluish colored trees, filmed from a low angle, provide no shelter, they seem unfriendly and cold. Neither the audience nor Theo is given time to digest the death of his best friend and of his former lover Julian.

Instead of continuity editing, there are frequent and seminal Long Takes, and instead of point-of-view shots, the camera acts most of the time as an independent player. With regards to focalization, it is important to underline that the camera's point of view is that of a random player present at the scene, reflecting the confusion any soldier or civilian would experience in such a fuzzy war theatre.

This subjective and highly mobile camera is one of the most striking techniques in *Children of Men*. The camera movement is independent of character movement. Often, the camera even moves directly opposed to the characters. When Theo runs out of the frame, away from the explosion in the exposition scene, the camera tracks closer. At other times, the camera pointedly drifts away, pans and fixates on images that the characters do not look at (anymore), showing animals burning on pyres, a weeping old woman locked in a cage. After the long take of the terrorist attack, while our protagonists drive away, the camera lingers to show us the dead soldiers.

The camera acts like a person present at the scene. Disrupting cinematic illusionism, the self-conscious camera reminds the audience of the existence of a narrating agency. During the birth scene, a self-conscious camera zooms and pans, swiveling between Theo and Kee, capturing the intimacy of the scene be-

tween them and the alien intrusion of the audience. In the battle scene, the camera is running alongside Theo, as if trying to keep pace. At other times, the camera keeps a distance. When Theo has to watch from afar as his friend is killed by the *Fishes*, a long shot keeps the viewer equally at distance. Like Theo, the viewer longs to be closer, to see more clearly what is happening, to be there with a character who has established himself not only as an innocent but also as a caring and funny human being. The long shot in this scene turns Theo's friend into a stand-in for everyone ever killed in this way. The shot reflects the power structure: a small man in the distance stands at the mercy of the terrorists. Yet the *Fishes* are small too, and ultimately they, like everyone, are in the clutches of Nature, and Nature has turned on humanity.

Besides a pronounced subjectivity, the hand-held camera evokes realist effects. Fashionable in cinéma vérité of the late 1950s and a preferred device of documentaries, the shaky hand-held camera in *Children of Men* results in a fake documentary look, complete with blood on the lens, close shots and abrupt pans, and a generally encumbered vision that reflects this world's chaos. This documentary verisimilitude in the activity of the camera adds another layer of realism that is consistent with the effect of the other techniques. The Long Take has been championed as a particularly realist style and the mise-en-scène and visual images of the war scene echo those of iconographic images of widely circulated daily TV news, which is why most reviewers underlined the realism of the violence in the film.

To summarize, the subjective camera insinuates that the narrative voice is showing us something the characters are too used to or too absorbed to notice. As the camera acts as an independent player, its activity calls attention to an overall narrating agency. The narrative voice is overdetermined in *Children of Men*. By employing the documentary style, the film establishes visual realism and seeks authenticity in its narration of violence.

This pairing of realism and a prominent narrative agency is reminiscent of art cinema as defined by Bordwell. Bordwell's central claim is that art film is a distinct mode of film practice, possessing a definite […] set of formal conventions, and implicit viewing procedures" ("Art Cinema" 716). According to Bordwell, art cinema is motivated by realism – in real locations, real problems, real, i.e. psychologically complex, characters. A commitment to both objective and subjective verisimilitude distinguishes the art cinema from the classical narrative mode. Secondly, art cinema tends to foreground the author and the act of narration, which Hollywood tries to efface. "Realism and authorial expressivity" are characteristic of the art film (Bordwell, "Art Cinema" 721), and when these impulses come into conflict, the art film solves the problem through ambiguity: "If the organizational scheme of the art film creates the occasion for max-

imizing ambiguity, how to conclude the film? The solution is the open-ended narrative" (Bordwell, "Art Cinema" 721).

Even though Bordwell's art films were in fact a limited specific set of films after World War II, *Children of Men* largely corresponds to his criteria: the narrative is open-ended and committed to a realist style, both visually and narratively. The subjective camera foregrounds the narrative agency; in cases of such distinct visual style, camerawork is considered part of the director's specific handwriting (Coyle). Bordwell draws attention to the fact that the art film is situated in relation to classical narrative cinema: "The art film requires the classical background set because deviations from the norm must be registered as such to be placed as realism or authorial expression" ("Art Cinema" 723).

Considering *Children of Men* as an art film helps to explain its relatively greater aesthetic liberty in its search for different means to narrate violence. More importantly, the film's aesthetic originality must be appreciated vis-à-vis the "norm" of the action film spectacular. External focalization, the Long Take and the subjective camera are fairly unusual techniques, as is the combination of an action-adventure movie with "art cinema" techniques. These aspects are part of a larger strategy to undermine audience expectations and cinematic codes. For *Children of Men*'s aesthetic strategy positions itself in contrast to the usual codes for the narration of violence. The following section will give some more examples for the way in which cinematic codes are evoked and broken.

2.3.2.4   Disrupting Cinematic Codes

Children of Men disrupts cinematic codes of narration in several ways. Frequently, the audience is presented with conflicting semantic signals, which results in a dissonance of codes, as when the screen is filled with warm light during a dangerous or frightening scene. When Theo is kidnapped and scared to death, for example, the whole image is flooded in a monochrome yellow light.

There are no cinematic signposts for the audience to expect plot development. If a narrative element suggests itself to be such a signpost, it turns out to be disloyal. For example, Julian is killed right after the most intimate moment between Julian and Theo. They have just presented a trick which involved egg-spitting but resulted in a moment that looked like a film kiss. This "magic moment" turned out to be unreal and unsustainable.

These contrasting aesthetic impressions make the film both more stimulating and more difficult to read and thus heighten audience engagement. Moreover, they draw attention to the ways in which we are usually conditioned to read films as well as the world around us, including its violence, semi-attentively.

The soundtrack supports this general strategy. In general, the sound is characterized by abrupt changes and long silent phases. There are unusual sound motifs, and the sound sometimes presents a mood or a code that contests the image. For example, nondiegetic choir music starts in moments of violence: almost every time somebody dies, during the terrifying scenes of entering the refugee camp Bexhill and during the birth of Kee's baby. When Theo passes the shrine for Baby Diego, the choir intones its celestial melody; but, as Theo is not paying any attention, the sound stops as in slapstick. Besides the choir, other prominent soundmotifs include a high-pitched sound and recorded children's laughter during the credits. The high-pitched sound is heard on the soundtrack after the exposition scene – apparently simulating the ringing sound in Theo's ears after the explosion. This, one character explains, is the "swan song of the earcells dying." The absence and lack of children is expressed in the motif of recorded children's laughter during the credits. In its own way narrating of violence and death, the sound provides an unusual auditory aesthetic experience.

The car chase is another brilliant example of how the film not only disrupts cinematic codes, but also finds a working alternative. Having discovered that the *Fishes* murdered Julian and are planning to kill Theo, he and Kee attempt to escape from the *Fishes'* hide-out in the middle of the night. Their car's engine does not start, and a shoe-less Theo has to push it; movement is impeded to the point where there is less a chase than almost a break-down of movement. They are discovered, the pursuers threaten to catch up on foot. The chase is disfigured, almost aborted. Instead of fast-track viewing and quick-paced editing, the car, the escapees and their followers are painstakingly slow. Yet, as everyone is on the same level of slowness, the scene is intensely suspenseful.

The result is a different and stark aesthetic experience for the viewer. The disruption of codes heightens the experience of unexpected shock and suspense, e.g. of Julian's killing or the chase scene that is taking place in "real time." These techniques distinguish themselves from the surface "show" glamour of spectacular and fast-pace editing in conventional chase scenes in action film. By playing off various semantic codes against each other, the usual cinematic signposts are dysfunctional.

There is also a different relation between audience and characters. Where usually focalization and point-of-view offers access to the protagonists' mental state, *Children of Men* is primarily narrated in external focalization (2.3.2.3). The audience is continuously kept at a distance to the characters. Both in terms of visual proximity and the way in which characters are framed in the image and in terms of narrative content, by undermining audience expectations (with regards to plot development, character relations and characterization). Instead of presenting (and questioning) the difference between good guys and bad guys, as in *V for*

Vendetta and *Munich, Children of Men* changes the whole concept of character-background and main-secondary character relation. Stam and Shohat point out that cinema translates correlations of social power into "rapports de force […] between foreground and background" (208). In *Children of Men*, most shots begin like an establishing shot. The characters are dispersed on all three levels (foreground, background, middle ground), which results in depth of image. Wide-angle lenses are often used. Close-ups are rare, long distance shots do not privilege actors over the background, neither are main characters privileged over secondary characters.

The visual flattening of character hierarchy is mirrored by the narrative content. Theo and Kee are on a par with the immigrants; no war fraction is thoroughly privileged. Most importantly, "Central characters die like extras" (Rowin). One by one all the main characters are killed. Ideologically, this implies a refusal of a hierarchy of deaths, of slaughtering hordes of "others" but sparing the main heroes. The ways in which characters are represented in the film therefore present a political statement in itself. Undermining character hierarchies, the distance of the shots and external focalization work together against privileging the characters visually or narratively over their social environment. All of these techniques are fairly unusual for action cinema and demand a different kind of attention on the part of the audience. As main characters are unsentimentally killed, the audience is conditioned from the start not to expect to be spared the death of the protagonists. The characterization of heroes and enemies will now be examined in greater detail.

2.3.2.5   Characters and Character Relations

Children of Men depicts the extent to which social exclusion in terms of "other" and self is erected on arbitrary principles. Theo and Kee become "fugees," the euphemist slang word for the immigrants, simply by crossing a border into a refugee camp. They assume an identity just by being in a certain place. As they are able to "pass" effortlessly and unobstructed into the refugee camp, being an immigrant "other" proves to be a highly permeable category of identity (at least in one direction).

There is a remarkable cut from the dead policemen at the side of the road to the dead Julian. They are graphically aligned in the image, framed in the same way. The shot is in closer spatial proximity to Julian, a character the audience has gotten to know a little. This unusual image – which shows only the characters' legs in the upper part of the image – links these antagonists in their violent death. The audience's point of view remains fragmented, as we see only their

legs, not the whole corpses. The viewer remains separated from the dead person. The fragmentation arguably disables voyeurism. No beautifying sublime is added, if anything, the image seems a little grotesque, assaulting the senses in its emphasis on the corporeal aspect.

Within an image studies approach, main character and sole survivor Kee is coded as "other" in every imaginable way. She is a refugee, a teenager, a woman, a dark-skinned foreigner who is, to top it all, pregnant. In a reading informed by psychoanalytic and feminist film theory, pregnancy codes her as grotesque and abject: "The womb represents the utmost in abjection for it contains a new life form which will pass from inside to outside [...] woman's body, particularly the pregnant body, [is central] in Rabelais's categorization of the grotesque" (Creed 49). In *Children of Men*, by contrast, Kee's pregnancy will save humanity. This reminder that humanity did begin in Africa gives a nice twist on the anxiety over reproduction that cinema, as one arm of the eurocentric "imperial imaginary" (Stam and Shohat 183) has historically projected on images of Third World women. Richard Dyer for example offers perceptive ideology-based readings of how action-adventure films play out such reproductive anxieties (213-22).

The absence of a love or sexual relationship between Kee and Theo underlines her role as Maria and disempowers a number of stereotypical images, such as black female hypersexuality (she does not serve as sexual prize for the hero), or of black "welfare queens" with a number of illicit children.[28]

Apart from the religious symbolism, the relationship between Kee and Theo presents a total break with the action film formula, which, as Rebecca Bell-Metereau has pointed out, generally left gender roles firmly in place after 9/11, with women alternating between sexy action babes, victims and nourishing nurse (146-7). The film's hero Theo is also atypical in several ways and does not conform to Bell-Metereau's distinction of male heroes in action films as Mr Action or Mr Sensitive (who learns to be the former). Over the course of the entire narrative, Theo behaves doggedly nonviolent. He acts physically in direct defense of Kee, but he never picks up a gun. As he used to be a radical, this appears to be a conscious choice, not lack of ability. Theo's development runs contrary to the typical action film vigilante structure, where an initially peaceful person is being forced to use violence (cf. 2.1.1.1 on the Vigilante myth as conceptualized by Cawelti ("Myths")). Theo's mission is to save Kee, but he does not redeem his own masculinity at the same time. Almost a broken character at the outset, his change is one going from apathetic despair to hopefulness. His emotional turning

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28 Compare Dyer's reading of Alien (1979) as fictionalization of – popularly circulating – images of and discourse on the young black welfare mother's uncontrolled and destructive reproduction (Dyer 216).

point and incitement to action does not come amid pyrotechnical explosions, but with the image of the pregnant Kee asking for his help.

The character relations in *Children of Men* and the characters themselves are atypical for action cinema. Main character Kee is coded as "other," yet she is the most important character for the narrative. The Them-Us dichotomy in terms of identity is disabled, as the characters pass through various spaces coding their identity. The characters are physically incapacitated – Kee is pregnant and Theo is shot, weaponless, and keeps loosing his shoes. They are completely powerless against the forces of violence they are faced with and are forced to watch as their friends are killed, they are shaken, attacked and blood-splattered just like the camera. Unusual for an action film, there is no romantic subplot.

Narrative techniques in *Children of Men* disrupt conventional cinematic codes and audience expectations, seeking to find fresh ways of narrating violence. The film tries to establish visual realism and searches for authenticity by employing the documentary style. The subjective camera hails the viewer. Characters are not privileged over their social surroundings; binary hero-enemy-structures are discarded. As employed in *Children of Men*, shot length and camera movement contribute to the narration for the Long Take can be read as a commentary on the spectacular as well as an aesthetic alternative. The Long Take creates an intense aesthetic experience for the spectator, adding a visceral, physical closeness to and immediacy of action and inhibiting audience detachment. The film's aesthetic daring must be considered in relation to the action-adventure film standard. Taken together, the techniques establish a functional alternative set for the narration of violence.

2.3.3   Narrative Challenges

Building on this analysis of narrative discourse on violence, the final section looks at how *Children of Men* contextualizes its images of violence in the contemporary discourse of post-9/11 political developments. Furthermore, *Children of Men* engages with the charges against the visual media and violence; the way in which the narrative reflects on contemporary media landscape creates a critical discourse on the media. In order to explain the political reading of the film, selected references will be examined: References to 9/11, to Guantánamo, the War in Iraq, and the reenacted Abu Ghraib torture picture. This image sends out a political message by its very technique as will be shown by reading these images through the prism of Sontag's ideas on photography.

2.3.3.1   References to Post-9/11 Politics

Children of Men is not a film about 9/11, yet moments in the film recall the ter-
rorist attacks by way of inference. There is talk of "Islamists," who might be
responsible for a bombing. The *Fishes* claim to have "stopped bombing after
Liverpool," Theo asks Julian whether her parents were in New York when "it"
happened. In each case, the short-cut suffices, as the city's name alone seems to
encapsulate such horror that there is no more need for elaboration. In a propa-
ganda commercial that runs on TV during Theo's train rides, names of various
cities are combined with acts or images of violence (the commercial ends on
"*Only Britain soldiers on."*). As in *Munich*'s exposition, the cities' names – New
York among them - become an acronym for the otherwise unspeakable horror
that happened there (cf 2.2.3.1). In the propaganda piece, the reference to 9/11 is
contextualized with other attacks. This technique of merging specific contempo-
rary references with signs pointing to historical or atemporal atrocity is used in
the depiction of the refugee camp as well.

    In *Children of Men*, illegal immigrants are rounded up, caged and impri-
soned in camps. Bexhill is one of these camps, a sort of walled city for detained
refugees, and a constant assault on human dignity. Partly, the camp imagery
evokes both associations to German concentration camps (some of the prisoners
speak German, and they are famished) as well as to the Guantánamo Bay de-
tainment camp. In this way, the depiction of a refugee camp and the persecution
of singled-out groups draw an analogy between contemporary and historical
atrocity.

    While it is important to acknowledge this similarity, the focus of this chap-
ter will be on the reference to contemporary violence. The images in the refugee
camp echo widely circulated images of real-life cruelty and war. Urban decay,
pollution, burned-out cars are rampant. The images recall Middle Eastern war-
zones or TV images of the War in Iraq, as we see marching protesters shouting
in Arabic, thrusting machine guns in the air, carrying banners and headbands
with Arabic signs, a crowd carrying the body of a dead man, a woman wailing
over a deadly wounded in her arms. When Theo and Kee are smuggled into
Bexhill, the camera shows cages with orange-clad, shaved prisoners, and
stripped and kneeling prisoners line the streets. These images are explicit refer-
ences to and reenactments of Guantánamo pictures. Upon entering Bexhill, Theo
and Kee are insulted and robbed by the soldiers. A tape is heard which repeats in
a loop: *"Britain supports you and provides you shelter. Do not support terror-
ists.*" This message stands in stark contrast to both the arbitrary harassment the
refugees are subjected to and the apparent lack of or adequate supplies and ac-
commodation. Several indications are made that the prisoners are hungry. The

de-individualized recorded voice expresses the one-way form of communication that is taking place: A god-like authority figure states the first sentence as fact, without explanation, and gives an order in the second. Given the circumstances, at least the first part of the statement appears quite cynical. The constant and annoying repetition by the loop is reminiscent of commercials or brainwashing procedures. It is a female voice, even though we do not see any women among the soldiers. The face of force is male, its voice is female, making its content more detached from the real surroundings. The fact that the voice is speaking English is also cynic as many among the refugees appear not know the language, making sign language to inquire for food. Furthermore, the tape loop mirrors an earlier scene where Theo attempted to enter into a dialogue with the *Fishes*. The only response he received was a repeated line: "*The Fishes fight for equal right for all immigrants.*" Memorized and recited, this line sounds like propaganda, disconnected from reality. In this way, the film shows how both the terrorists and the government in *Children of Men* rely on propaganda and repetition to disseminate their message, in utter disregard of reality.

   Children of Men's commentary on the media is introduced by the film's own highly referential and intensely layered visual language. Images and texts, forms of narration enter almost every frame; and they always refer to violence or death – from the pictures of dead loved ones in the refugee camps to cave drawings of warplanes and wounded people. There are TV screens, billboards, images, photographs in almost every frame. *Children of Men* provides layers upon layers of signs, from the propaganda on TV to graffiti-covered walls to the newspaper headlines and propaganda posters.[29] A TV report on the "day 1000 of the Siege of Seattle" offers a typical example of referentiality to post-9/11 politics in the film. The Bush administration's decision to declare war on an abstract entity has been thoroughly criticized for opening the gates to the prospect of permanent warfare – since it is unclear what would constitute the victory in or the end of such a war. The report on "day 1000 of the Siege of Seattle" in such a dystopian film can therefore be read as reference to the fears connected to this latest U.S. foreign policy development.

   The film's use of references and contemporary war imagery tends to disrupt the creation of the cinematic illusion. This strategy has already introduced by its narrative discourse, such as the subjective camerawork. Explicit references in the form of iconic images can be interpreted as a reflection on the way in which

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29 Often, politically or culturally charged signs are recontextualized. Theo's rich cousin decorates his living room with Picasso's famous Guernica painting; when Theo asks what keeps him going in spite of humanity's approaching extinction, he responds that he does not think about it, and apparently, he neither thinks about the real daily violence and injustice around him nor about the painting's origin and meaning.

cinema was challenged by 9/11, as they mimic the "intrusion of the real." The following section will consider this idea along the example of the re-enacted Abu Ghraib picture in *Children of Men*.

2.3.3.2   Engaging with 9/11: Iconic Images and The Media

In order to discuss this iconic image, Sontag's essays on photography offer inspiring observations. As her arguments concern not only the ontological but also the political dimensions of photography and photojournalism, they create a helpful framework. Of particular interest will be her arguments on the role of spectatorship.

An image of pain can elicit various responses. At times it was believed that the sheer graphic tension of formerly censored images could turn people against violence and war: "For a long time some people believed that if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war" (Sontag, "Regarding the Pain" 14). A picture of pain induces shock, revulsion, and shame - yet the shock can wear off, the viewer can decide to look away, or even feel violated in return for being forced to look at horrific images. Sontag surmises that such a collapse of empathy comes from a banalized, passive consumption of shock images in too safe surroundings, which corrupts and desensitizes our faculties ("Regarding the Pain" 99-101).

At the same time we are drawn to images of pain and degradation. Regarding pain can be pleasurable and even erotic: "All images that display the violation of an attractive body are, to a certain degree, pornographic" (Sontag, "Regarding the Pain" 95). Therefore, exploitation is always an issue; just looking at images of pain turns the viewer into a voyeur. Even disregarding the sexual component of possessing through the gaze, the viewer is made complicit just by regarding images of pain, violence, or destruction. Moreover, the charges are similar, whether the object is a beautiful body in pain, or the sublime or spectacular of destruction.

In *Children of Men*, when Theo and Kee are in the bus on their way to Bexhill, the camera pans by several cages with prisoners in them. One of these prisoners seen is the infamous "hooded man" from the Abu Ghraib prison torture pictures. He is seen in the exact position as the real pictures. At the same time, the shot is fairly unobtrusive. The man seems to be much further away from the viewer than in the photograph. Within this violent world, this image can even be overlooked; it does not stand out. Again the camera is bearing witness where the protagonists are not looking. This technique works like a request to the viewer of the film: *Look what I'm showing you.*

Through this invocation of iconic images, real violence intrudes into the fiction, breaking the cinematic illusion. The image works together with the other techniques of the film to disrupt audience expectations and to cancel out the security of the fiction. Re-enacting the torture picture as well as iconic images of Guantánamo recontextualizes the image by jumping registers from fiction to evening news. As the context is always decisive for the way in which a given audience receives images (Sontag, "On Photography" 106-9), the insertion of this image works against passive consumption and reception (cf 2.1.3.1).

The image presents a political commentary. Photojournalism has quite a proud history in presenting political criticism and influencing public opinion. The most famous example is the media coverage of Vietnam, which was an important factor in the decline of public support for the war: "Photographs […] did more to increase the public revulsion against the war (in Vietnam) than a hundred hours of televised barbarities" (Sontag, "On Photography" 18). There is always a politics of the gaze. The power relations between those seeing, those depicted, and those filming are essential especially in the representation of violence. Vietnam was depicted as a TV war, and very much a war about the human body (body counts, the iconic images, disabled veterans). By contrast, the first Gulf War was represented as a media war of detached gaze: "media coverage [during the gulf war] endowed the spectatorial eye with what Paul Virilio calls the 'symbolic function of a weapon'". Stam and Shohat criticize the "conquering gaze from nowhere" in media discourse and representation of war (Stam and Shohat 126). It is in light of the Vietnam precedent that the official reaction to the publication of the Abu Ghraib torture pictures must be seen. The political establishment reacted to the images and their proliferation as the problem, rather than the event itself. The taking and dissemination of the image made the event more real and threatening to those who were trying to hush things up (Getlin).

The pictures of Abu Ghraib were not taken by professionals, but their impact was enormous. As enacted in *Children of Men*, the images refer to real violence that was recorded by a camera and coded in a particular way. Sontag's example of lynching postcards constitutes the most appropriate frame of comparison to contextualize the terrible collapse of pain and entertainment in the form of images. Lynching postcards, pictures depicting the African-American victims of lynching and their white killers grinning besides them were taken as souvenirs. The horror with which the Abu Ghraib torture pictures were received equally derived to a large extent from their "souvenir quality." Taken in a social context and by amateurs, the broadly disseminated pictures are the manifestation of what some called "having a good time" (Sontag, "Regarding the torture").

However, the Abu Ghraib torture pictures, which appear so self-evident in their shocking wrongness, are in fact quite elusive witnesses to a larger, more

complex reality. This is why Philip Gourevitch, who collaborated on a film about and wrote a book based on the transcripts of soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison, shares Sontag's wariness of the visual media, sometimes bordering on distrust.[30] Both Sontag and Gourevitch deplore the focus on the fact and existence of the photographs instead of their content and the parts they do not show. The Abu Ghraib pictures are powerful but they are not complete. Instead of using the photograph as a starting point to find the true story, says Gourevitch, we have the habit of assuming that the photographs display a sort of visual completeness.

Like Gourevitch, Sontag points out that photographs are only atoms of reality. They contain real information that is still in need of interpretation (Sontag, "On Photography" 23-4). Nevertheless, the viewer of the photographic image is culturally trained to receive these pictures as authentic, objective and real: "While some may think they get the main points of the Abu Ghraib story, [Gourevitch's] book offers a provocative challenge by not including any pictures. The reason, Gourevitch said, is that a photograph fails to reveal the full context of what is happening. The real story can get lost" (Getlin).

Read in a post-9/11 context, the "intrusion of the real" by the Abu Ghraib torture picture in a fiction film takes on a particular significance as a response to the discussions in the aftermath of 9/11 about how the event challenged conceptions of and the relation between the real and the virtual. These particular pictures remind the audience of their complicity in the production and consumption of images of atrocity. *Children of Men* pursues this critical discourse on the newsmedia as the following example of the Baby Diego motif will show.

In the film's exposition, right before a bomb detonates in the café, a stunned crowd is avidly watching the TV news on the death of "Baby Diego," the youngest human being. The newsmedia's implication in the creation and dissemination of violence is highlighted. Analogous to Sontag's parallelization of "shooting" a picture and shooting a person – "The camera is a sublimated gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder" (Sontag, "On Photography" 14-5) – the news media in *Children of Men* is complicit in the creation of violence it is cynically exploiting. Baby Diego was attempting to eschew the forces of the media; he died in a brawl after refusing to give an autograph. The media's pursuit and unrelenting public demand created the violence and thus the news. Diego "struggled all his life" with the media attention "thrust upon him," purrs the TV voice hypocritically.

The theme of this tabloid media hype surrounding Diego's death is picked up again several times, such as when Theo passes a sort of public mourning

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30 Sontag's arguments are indeed predicated upon assumptions of audience passivity: She recurrently complains about viewers' apathy and her aesthetic point-of-view seems to condemn TV and popular culture in particular.

place, where people deposit flowers and weep. This hype, the shrine as well as the fact that Diego died trying to escape media attention are most obviously a reference to Princess Diana, her death and its reception. The Diana comparison seems apt for Diana's death was "more keenly felt, more adroitly exploited" than "any other violent celebrity death and/or international catastrophe of the entire preceding century" (Dixon, "Disaster" 8).

The "Baby Diego" theme is also a sarcastic remark on virtuality of vicarious experience. A whole crowd has been blown to pieces in the café, but those who mourn in *Children of Men* do so for Baby Diego. Instead of mentioning the terrorist attack, Theo takes time off under the pretense of being affected by Baby Diego's death. Real violence is ignored in favor of hyped experience. In this way, the film reflects back on and criticizes the contemporary media. Concerning the charges against cinema, the film's own formal strategies mark the absolute opposite to these criticized forms of representing violence by eschewing both the spectacular and the melodramatic or sentimental modus of narrating violence.

2.3.4   Résumé for *Children of Men*

Sontag claims that "To those who are sure that right is on one side, oppression and injustice on the other, and that the fighting must go on, what matters is precisely who is killed and by whom […] To the militant, identity is everything," (Sontag, "Regarding the Pain" 10). *Children of Men* contests this kind of thinking on every level of its narrative discourse and by the narrative itself. In contrast to theoretical approaches that seek to find ethical grounds for privileging some types of violence over others, the narrative does not even bother to attempt explaining and justifying the violence onscreen. The warring parties in this narrative present an equal danger to the non-violent protagonists. Warfare and terrorism in *Children of Men* are not neatly separable, as war's collateral damage hurts innocent civilians (2.3.1.2). Amidst a chaotic dystopian world, the full force of the state contextualizes and even overshadows the use of terrorist violence. The war theatre is set in a refugee camp, underlining how those who are already victims are again victimized by violence. The underlying cause for the violence is framed as a biological threat (2.3.1.3). As some form of disease or plague, the theme of infertility inscribes the fear of an invisible, pervasive threat of apocalyptic dimensions into the text. It also continues a cinematic tradition of depicting apocalypse in the form of diseases. The characterization of this threat reflects a discourse on fear that is currently cultivated with regards to terrorism. Especially the metaphor of the virus has entered our daily talks about foreign policy

threats. The film reflects on the rhetoric of its border-threatening qualities, which correspond to new enemy and threat scenarios. Within the narrative, these fears are taken out on the immigrants. This in turn recalls not only historical persecution but also contemporary issues and anxieties. Thus, the theme of infertility as a metaphor of disease is one of the ways in which the film throws the current political language and the discourse on terrorism back to its audience.

The contemporary news discourse is expressed in *Children of Men*'s multi-layered frames and iconographic imagery, directing the viewer to contemporary warzones. Onscreen violence constantly refers to real life violence. In this way, *Children of Men* offers an aesthetic responses to the problem of the potential pleasure of regarding representations of violence: By establishing an aesthetic realism through its documentary style and mise-en-scène, shocking visuals seek to disable or to rupture a contemplative or detached gaze (2.3.2.1). Like *V for Vendetta* and *Munich*, *Children of Men* engages with the role of the newsmedia in the creation of violence and the role of cinema with regards to its consumption and habituation. The film's own formal strategies mark the absolute opposite to those forms of representation – images of spectacular destruction – which were accused of visually anticipating the 9/11 attacks. *Children of Men* seeks a new authenticity and an original language for narrating violence, most remarkably in the Long Take. This technique is employed in scenes of violence, adding temporal and spatial realism and engaging the viewer by its visceral, physical closeness and immediacy of action. The Long Take thus generates some of the effects usually evoked by the spectacular mode while discarding the latter's detached surface quality (2.3.2.2). External focalization, the camera's point of view as that of a random player present, results in lack of overview for the viewer (2.3.2.3). At the same time, the subjective camera as an active narrative voice seems to call on the viewer. In its search for an authentic form of narrating violence, the film generally works hard to break audience expectations (2.3.2.4). These techniques can be read as an attempt to find a new aesthetic strategy, untainted by the charges made against film. Arguably, as an art film, *Children of Men* can take more liberties in this search for a fresh angle on authentic narration.

References to post-9/11 politics demand a political reading of the film (2.3.3.1). Moreover, the film's visual narration reflects back on our media landscape in response to the charges made against the media. Specific contemporary references – to 9/11, Abu Ghraib or Guantánamo – are merged with semantic signs pointing to historical cases of atrocity. In the "reenacted" torture picture from Abu Ghraib prison real violence intrudes into the fiction. By capitalizing on photography's power to enlarge a sense of reality, the film highlights its political message and works against a passive reception of these images (2.3.3.2).

3 Conclusion

This study generated a number of findings concerning the way in which these movies narrate violence. Each film offers different aesthetic responses to the challenge of narrating post-9/11 terrorist narratives in an action-movie format; and each movie engages with both contemporary politics and ontological charges against its medium.

On the level of narrative content, each movie frames terrorism with other horrendous forms of violence such as war or torture. This contextualization inhibits an easy condemnation of only terrorism as an atrocious form of violence. Just War Theory helped to assess the legitimacy of these forms of violence and to explain the language in which they are justified. Various justifications are evoked and undermined in *V for Vendetta* and *Munich*, including cultural frameworks such as the savage war myth or the Western vigilante myth. In these two films, the heroes use essentially the same means and justifications as their opponents, and the connection and similarity between the opposing parties is expressed through visual parallelization. This shifts the boundaries demarcating good from bad, legitimate from illegitimate violence. Where cause and response are visually and narratively parallelized in *V for Vendetta* and *Munich*, these causalities are undistinguishable in *Children of Men*. The film dispenses of justifications altogether. Violence is not evaluated, assessed or justified; there is no possibility to distinguish between forms of violence, as the viewer is lacking sufficient information on the various fractions and their causes.

Thus, these narratives enlarge the perspective on issues of violence and terrorism. Instead of asking 'how to react to 9/11,' the question is changed to 'how to react to terrorist violence' or 'how to react to violence in general?' The narratives play out different forms of possible responses to violence. By pointing out similarities between forms of violence, the existence of state-perpetrated terrorism and exceptional or extenuating circumstances, the films aim to open the viewers' mental arena for a struggle with the concept of terrorism. The viewer is led to reflect on what encompasses terrorist or political violence, how the term relates to cultural constructs such as the avenging vigilante hero or freedom fighters, and whether there are exceptional circumstances that justify political, including terrorist, violence.

As narrative film represents, in Jameson's words, "the political unconscious of its historical moment" (Williams 10), there is always a politics in the images on screen. These films' narratives can therefore be read as addressing collective

emotions and contemporary issues in fictionalized form. Values are challenged or confirmed by narratives of "ethically formative" fiction (Booth 140). As a social outlet of emotions, the films correspond to current capacity of imagination. Read as a comment on developments in U.S. foreign policy, the movies question inherited cultural and cinematic justifications and the effectiveness of counterviolence, particularly if motivated by revenge. A combination of distancing devices – of temporal and geographical displacement – and rapport through references enables the movies to pose questions concerning the ethics and implications of the U.S. response to 9/11, including occasionally harsh criticism. The films explore the problem that a "just cause" is related to but logically distinct from actual consequences. Reading these films in the context of contemporary politics is justified and supported by their use of references as well as the evocation (and breakdown of) binary categories.

Traditionally in cinema, the distinction between hero and opponent justifies the hero's use of violence and makes it the morally necessary choice: "[O]ne of the major organizing principles […] is to so characterize the villains that the hero is both intellectually and emotionally justified in destroying them" (Cawelti, "Six-Gun" 42). Stam and Shohat claim that a "eurocentric gaze" is sutured into the codes of the cinematic apparatus. These codes establish looking relations which offer to the spectator a "colonial perspective" (Stam and Shohat 120), establishing narratives of an "us" vs "them" and depict the "natives" as "others" (Stam and Shohat 108). These "deeply rooted […] Manichean schemas of good and evil" result in narratives "in which virtuous American heroes do battle against demonized Third World villains" (Stam and Shohat 201).

As the heroes in *V for Vendetta* and *Munich* turn into increasingly tainted and ambivalent characters, the politics of identification fail to guide the viewer in assessing the legitimacy of their violence. Protagonists and antagonists employ similar justifications for their actions and use potentially illegitimate violence, including acts of terrorism. Where *V for Vendetta* and *Munich* collapse the boundaries between their heroes' and enemies' use of violence, *Children of Men* changes the whole concept of character-background and main-secondary character relation. The film deconstructs a binary worldview when its protagonists pass various narrative spaces identifying them as "us" or "them."

The cinematic breakdown of a neat distinction between friend and foe is not new or unique, but the topos gains significance in combination with post-9/11 references. The Bush administration has been faulted for their employment of simplistic and "cinematic" "with-us-or-against-us doctrines of world struggle" (Sontag, "Regarding the Torture"). Both the rhetoric and the political approach proper have been accused of bearing an uncanny resemblance to the opposing parties' grasp of the world: "American action abroad [is] directed not against a

state as such [but] against a regime which flouts certain values [which] parallels the action of Muslim terrorists" (Gilbert 6). The films fictionalize the real-life fear that our response to atrocity mirrors the act, playing out a fundamental insecurity about whether our cause is legitimate, more legitimate than and essentially different from the cause of the opponent. *V for Vendetta* and *Munich* present revenge fantasies and expose the problems of using violence against violence. In *Children of Men*, both the forces of the state and the terrorist insurgents endanger our protagonists. By evoking and disrupting the binary model, all three movies work against this structure as cinematic standard and as popular shortcut in public discourse and political rhetoric.

A political reading of the films is supported and encouraged by their use of references, which situate the films' fictive narratives in relation to reality. The U.S. reponse to 9/11 is questioned (*Munich*) or outright criticized (*V for Vendetta, Children of Men*). These contemporary references are frequently juxtaposed with references to other political-historical events. The combination generates a new meaning. Instead of displaying 9/11 as a specific and insular traumatic event, the movies examine violence and terrorism as cyclically repetitive and historical phenomena in our world, as well as the potentially panicky responses to these events.

Besides references to post-9/11 politics, each film also refers in a more or less explicit degree to 9/11 itself. This presents a narrative challenge, however, as the demand for modesty in the representation of violence that relates to 9/11 (Sontag, "Regarding the Pain" 95) and the demand for realism in the depiction of violence as cinematic requisite result in opposing pulls. Displacement offers a partial answer to this challenge. To account for the modesty that is sought in the artistic treatment of 9/11, the films employ shifts in the geographical and temporal setting. This displacement is enacted on the level of setting, narrative, and visualization.

The narratives are set in the future or the past, and in countries which work well as stand-in's for the United States. Both Great-Britain and Israel are close political allies but also hold an emotional, historical and cultural proximity to the United States; and both countries suffered major terrorist attacks on home soil. The narrative focus in each movie lies on the appropriate response to and the consequences of all violence, including counter-violence. The main narratives revolve around the response to an act or event that has *already happened*. This violent Ur-event has caused the trauma and the violence that we see. It is here that 9/11 is inscribed as a meta-narrative. The violent acts at each movie's core are all framed as responses – responses of a traumatized nation (*Munich*), a traumatized person (*V for Vendetta*), and oppressed individuals in an essentially unfree and violent world (*Children of Men*).

Visualization is the most challenging aspect. Even though 9/11 provided for surprisingly little explicitly graphic horror – carnage, floods of blood and dismembered limbs – the few documented images that show the like have only been broadcasted once on television and are now locked up. To "show vivid images of suffering American civilians was considered too psychologically disturbing to the general public" states Brottman because the event has not been historicized enough in collective memory (Brottman 167). Crucial images of 9/11 remain missing, either because they do not exist or because they are not shown. It is of course particularly difficult for a *visual* medium to express this notion of absence. The missing children in *Children of Men*, the missing and fantasized images of the terror attacks in *Munich* as well as many references to hidden truths, faces, and images in *V for Vendetta* can be interpreted an aesthetic processing of these emotions of absence, lack, and loss.

A mental connection to 9/11 is also evoked by implicit references, elements that seem to bear a "family resemblance." For example, each film engages with ways in which the event is engraved in our minds in abbreviated form: One way of pointing to 9/11 is the emphasis on location, a city's name beholding the terror that happened there. Cultural memory, Prats points out, labors under the illusion "that the locus of an activity contains the very memory of it: remember the place […] and you have thereby remembered, or at the very least invoked, the event" (Prats 108). Also, the prominent presence of the media reflects the fact how the events were to a great extent translated and experienced - most people watched the towers fall on television. The role of the newsmedia in creating, disseminating and even fostering violence is highlighted in each film. In *V for Vendetta*, the media's embeddedness and appropriation by those in power is criticized, as is its role in disseminating terrorism in *Munich* and *Children of Men*.

All three films engage with the pitfalls and problems of representing and regarding violence, in particular violence that relates to 9/11. The narrative emphasis on the consequences of violence is mirrored by a visual deferral of the 9/11 meta-narrative. The causal Ur-event either remains invisible, is translated into a metaphor or shown with delay, in chopped and mediated form. Images of the triggering event appear only after a period of latency in *V for Vendetta* and *Children of Men*, which forego an exposition and plunge *in medias res* into their dystopian worlds. *Munich* presents a narrative on a primarily Israeli trauma and appropriates its "moral lessons." On top of this narrative shift, the terrorist attacks in *Munich* are shown in interrupted flashbacks. *V for Vendetta* equally offers flashbacks and intradiegetic narratives on terrorism, told for the most part by an unreliable narrator. In this film, torture serves as metaphor for terrorism, expressing similar predicaments of justification and facing similar moral char-

ges. The anxieties surrounding terrorism are inscribed as a threat of apocalyptic dimensions in the cinematic text of *Children of Men*. Framed like a disease, infertility in this film constitutes an invisible, pervasive threat, translating the latest national security terminology and discourse on terrorism. Metaphors of disease, in particular viral disease, correspond to a cultural and cinematic tradition of depicting enemies as threat to the body of the nation. Contemporary anxieties are thus inscribed in the cinematic text.

Moreover, the focus on the spectacular effect of the collapse of the World Trade Center has been suggested as one way of apprehending the event (Zizek, "Desert"). As 9/11 was perceived to resemble cinematic formulas, cinema was considered implicated by having pre-imagined the terrorist attacks through images and narratives of spectacular destruction. This concerns in particular action cinema and its narrative technique. Yet the spectacular is also an established mode of representation and a pleasure-generating technique of cinema. The pleasure of looking is condensed in the spectacular, and it is part of our aesthetic heritage. Like its aesthetic twin, the sublime, it depicts destruction in a way that is appealing to the viewer.

Each of the movies responds differently to this challenge of conjoining narratives about violence, action film discourse, and unmistakable reference to contemporary politics. In *V for Vendetta*, spectacular violence and the visual beautification of violence are reframed. The way in which the spectacle of blowing up symbolic buildings is beautified and historically located in this film points to conceptualizations of terrorism as art as well as to the implication of cinema in this particular form of scopophillic pleasure. The spectacle appears only after a thoroughly ambiguous framework for terrorism has been established. Self-referential devices and references to various generic codes draw attention to cinema's complicity in justifying violence and the way in which viewers are trained to perceive violence. The film raises a whole specter of popular cinematic justifications for the use of violence, including terrorism. The audience is encouraged to engage with these ideas and the ambivalences they contain. Cinematic formulas of depicting violence, characterizing enemies, or justifying violence are evoked and disrupted in *Munich* as well. *Munich* delivers its traumatic images of violence with latency, chopping and allocating them over the course of the narrative. terrorism is narrated in the form of media reporting and in flashbacks. These flashbacks continuously disrupt the potential sensual pleasure of the spectacular by their particular structure. The flashbacks' frequency and their insertion in the first narrative appear to mimic traumatic repetition and eventual processing for the protagonist as well as for the audience. *Children of Men* seeks a new authenticity and an original language for narrating violence. The film's own formal strategies mark the absolute opposite to those forms of representation –

images of spectacular destruction – which were accused for visually anticipating the 9/11 attacks. The film's cinematic discourse reflects on the role of cinema with regards to the consumption of and habituation to violence. The film blatantly deconstructs action movie schemes of depicting violence, replacing the spectacular with the Long Take and parodying cinematic codes of depicting screen violence, such as the chase. Thus, in each film, alternatives to the spectacular mode are found and where the form is employed, it is not innocently framed for the voyeuristic consumption of the viewer.

Moreover, the films visual narration reflects back on our media landscape in response to the charges made against the media. *V for Vendetta* encourages media savyness in the viewer by fictionalizing the battle over terminology and language and drawing attention to the role of the media in disseminating or resisting fear. *Children of Men* also engages with the role of the newsmedia in the creation of violence by analogy to Princess Diana's death and various diegetic layers of the media feeding on violence. The media scenes in *Munich* highlight the role of the media in disseminating the news and creating a platform, the communicative aspect of terrorism, as well as the subjective reception of the facts. These media scenes are shot in documentary style and spatially and graphically aligned with real documentary footage. *Munich* builds its political commentary on a narrative of a well-known and well-publicized real conflict. For impact, the film relies on spectatorial knowledge of events to come outside its narrative frame. The film encourages a metaphorical reading by emphasizing the similarities between the two cases of terrorism.

A further aspect of the movies' aesthetic response to the charges of complicity in violence is the re-enactment of images of real violence: images from Guantánamo in *V for Vendetta*, the explicit reference to 9/11 in *Munich*, and the notorious torture pictures of Abu Ghraib in *Children of Men*. Obviously, these iconic images refer to real violence, and thus display a political commentary in the visual language of cinema. The images can be read, for example, as cinematic voice – unmistakably illuminating the cinematic narrator's point of view. By influencing the experience and perception of reality, the representation of violence in photography retains enormous power, and the films self-consciously employ the power of the medium for their political agenda.

Photography – as well as media coverage – can make things more real to those who do not experience it first-hand; it can channel sympathies and determine the public agenda. The difference between perception and the real thing is crucial. Both the effect of enlarging or eroding a sense of reality because of oversaturation obviously does not affect reality itself (Sontag, "Regarding the Pain" 109). Discussions on the relation between reality and the cinematic image are as old as the medium - Photography and later cinema had to fight to be considered

autonomous art forms, not merely a perfected form of mimesis, of depicting reality. Thus, these iconic images of real violence invite further research on subjects that could only be touched on here. For example, how does the intrusion of these images affect the relation between film and photography, concepts of real and virtual violence, the aesthetic capacity and autonomy of cinema?

In the context of films which massively reference 9/11 and post-9/11 politics, these images can also be read as a commentary on the charges against cinema. The seduction of photography lies in the fact that it seems to provide "access to the real." Despite all the ways in which the photographic image can be – and has always been – manipulated, cropped, posed, framed, photographs are still a record of the real. They witness something that definitely existed. Something of this "real" is ontologically connected to photography. Therefore, the insertion of iconic, desperately real images in fiction film - whose un-real-ness is typically asserted (*It's only a movie*) - reverses in a bizarre way the perception of the 9/11-images as fictional spectacle become real. Disregarding poststructuralist claims that reality is inaccessible and always presented and accessed through language, what was of interest here is the *perception* that the boundaries between Real and Fictional have shifted: While 9/11 is likened to a movie, real executions are presented in a narrative of fiction, as "dramatic spectacle […] theatre", produced for a market and in need of an audience (Burke). Self-references and iconic images attest to these boundary disputes. They disrupt cinematic illusion-building and invert the "fictional" aspects of 9/11 by letting "the real" intrude into the cinematic text. In this way, the movies engage with charges against the movies and the media for their implication in acts of violence, as well as charges against the viewer of such image.

While the roles of and charges against the newsmedia and cinema are obviously different, the consumer of either product is implicated in similar ways. Sontag blames lack of empathy on the quantity of images of horror that surround us as well as the passivity of their reception (Sontag, "Regarding the Pain" 102). In the 1970s, Sontag demanded an "ecology" of images. In her later work, she acknowledged the impossibility of this demand, highlighting the limits of photography as well as the opportunities a picture can offer. At this moment in time, there is less talk about the habituating effects of sheer quantity– the power of the visual image is re-asserted in the form of widely circulating and widely known images of Abu Ghraib, the riots after the Mohammed caricatures, the execution videos, the pictures of 9/11 that were shown only once or never (Sontag, "Regarding the Pain" 68). With regards to audience passivity, the narrative discourse of these films works to engage the viewer, thus avoiding the "passivity that dulls feeling" (Sontag, "Regarding the Pain" 102). Narrative techniques occasionally disrupt the cinematic illusion, in contrast to the characteristic devices of action

film, the detachment of the spectacular frame special effects and CGIs, and their increasing verisimilitude seeking to immerse the viewer in the fiction. For example, the hero in *V for Vendetta* speaks directly to the audience, the camera acts independently of character movement in *Children of Men* or *Munich*, and the references to real violence also disrupt cinematic illusionism. These techniques are calling, almost hailing the viewer. In *V for Vendetta*, the category of focalization tricks the audience to engage with the ambivalent concept of terrorism/freedom fighting incarnated by the hero character. As 'terrorism' is such a negatively connoted term, the films employ specific cinematic devices to encourage their audiences to question cultural shortcuts and traditional frame in the movies.

Spectatorship entails passive and active components, and it has been argued that one of the decisive differences between film and photography (or stills) is that the former dictates our pace of viewing. The viewer is vulnerable as "part of the distinctive passivity of someone who is a spectator twice over, spectator of events already shaped, first by the participants and second by the image maker [...] we are inactive, the camera looks for me, and obliges me to look" (Sontag, "On Photography" 168-9). Contrarily, I find that in these movies, different processes are at work. The films enhance their shock effect by including these iconic "real" images. The use of these images circumvents a passive and distant gaze.

One of Sontag's arguments relates the fact that those who look at the photograph necessarily take up the position and perspective of the one who had taken the pictures. This perspective often involves an "othering" of those depicted. The Abu Ghraib pictures crassly expose this disturbing aspect. By focalizing and aligning the viewer with the side that is usually the "other," the films work against this automatism.

By inserting and re-enacting these iconic images, the films avail themselves of the power and aura of the photographic real to disseminate the knowledge of their content and to make their reality palpable to the viewer as bystander. As these iconic images function as visual short-cut for a greater event (Sontag, "Regarding the Pain" 22), their employment amounts to a political critique. The images also invite an interpretation in response to the charges against cinema. Instead of inventing or preceeding the real acts of violence, cinema can document, engage the viewer with moral dilemma, help to see different perspectives. As the photographs are not inserted as stills or visual quotes, but re-enacted, the films re-affirm the cultural influence and power of their own medium.

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