

Terminal Indifference: The Hollywood War Film Post-September 11

Kim Toffoletti and Victoria Grace

Deakin University, Australia, and University of Canterbury, New Zealand

With the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, we might even be said to have before us the absolute event, the ‘mother’ of all events, the pure event uniting within itself all the events that have never taken place’ (Baudrillard 2003a, 3-4).

Terrorist attacks on New York’s Twin Towers on September 11, 2001 prompted a renewed and vigorous call from America and the West to defeat the threat of terrorism. Writing in the aftermath of this incident, Jean Baudrillard observed that ‘moral condemnation and the holy alliance against terrorism’ constituted the dominant reaction to these events by the West (Baudrillard 2003a, 4). Such rhetoric continues to form the basis of America’s military involvement in the Middle East. In early 2003 Iraq became the frontline in the war on terror, with president George W. Bush implementing Operation Iraqi Freedom as part of America’s response to ‘defeating terrorist organizations’, as advocated in its National Strategy for Combating Terrorism (2003, 15). The mission ‘to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, to end Saddam Hussein’s support for terrorism, and to free the Iraqi people’ was offered as justification for US military action (Bush 2003). Contestation of the motives behind the Iraq War that discount Bush’s rationale and explore alternative agendas (such as securing oil supplies and US global power), reveal the ‘threat of terrorism’ to be a powerful discursive and ideological framework within American political discourse and public

opinion to justify and legitimate war in the Middle East after 9/11 (Klare 2003, Dunmire 2009).

Given the centrality of 'terrorism' in the narratives put forth to legitimate America's military occupation of Iraq, Baudrillard's writings on the subject offer a useful counterpoint through which to consider how 'terrorism' operates symbolically, and fundamentally, the dilemmas this raises for a Western psyche grappling with how the 'terrorist threat' might be answered, engaged with, responded to. Despite more than eight years having passed since Islamic terrorists attacked the Twin Towers, America and its allies are still seeking to come to terms with the cause, effects and consequences of terrorism – both politically and within its cultural imaginary – as evidenced by the continued occupation of Iraq and the public reaction it has elicited. Baudrillard's interpretation of terrorism can go some way toward advancing our understanding of how the West has responded to the war in Iraq. One such response – which we pursue here – can be found in mainstream cinematic depictions of the war and audience reactions to it.

Amidst the political and popular discussions about the merits and madness of the allied invasion of countries purported to support terrorist activities, emerged a suite of Hollywood films seeking to engage with, and engage viewers in, such debates. Alongside *Lions For Lambs* (Robert Redford, 2007), which tackles US occupation of Afghanistan through the encounter between a senator (Tom Cruise) and journalist (Meryl Streep), a number of big-budget films were made responding to the war in Iraq. These included *Home of the Brave* (Irwin Winkler 2006), *Battle for Haditha* (Nick Broomfield, 2007), *Redacted* (Brian De Palma, 2007), *In the Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis, 2007), *Stop-Loss* (Kimberly Peirce, 2008) and *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008).

Within this suite of films, three stand out markedly from the others for their emphasis on the personal cost to American soldiers on their return to civilian life. *Home of the Brave*, *In the Valley of Elah* and *Stop-Loss* share a number of thematic concerns. Each chronicles the traumatic experiences and emotions of soldiers during and after their tour of duty. In doing so they

offer a poignant commentary on the effect of the US invasion of Iraq on the American psyche and its cultural imago. The films foreground the way the experience of being an American soldier in Iraq creates an uncanny rebound as traumatised men and women try to live through its consequences (otherwise known as ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’). The films in their different ways insinuate that the victims of the ‘war on terror’ are ordinary Americans – not only soldiers, but their friends, families and wider society, who are depicted as bearing the cost of war; a war that is somehow less like a ‘war’ and more like an amorphous combat zone lacking the kind of ‘enemy’ soldiers are trained to confront, and without the boundaries creating the distinction of enemy from civilians that soldiers are trained to navigate. The ‘normal’ horrors of ‘war’ that result from a polarisation of defined forces are somehow transformed into a form of abjection as the soldiers lose their civilian and ‘American’ coordinates.

There appears to be a stark contrast between the way the filmed and televised images of the planes impacting the World Trade Centre and its subsequent collapse galvanised an overwhelming fascination one could say of the entire American (and more broadly Western) public – true shock and awe – and the apparent indifference of the same public to many cinematic depictions of the damaged, injured and traumatised soldiers who were, in the popular mindset, sent to war as part of the strategic response to this event. General consensus is that, up until the 2010 Academy Award winner *The Hurt Locker*, movies about American warfare after 9/11 have failed to capture audiences, as indicated by comedian Jon Stewart whilst hosting the 2008 Academy Awards:

Not all films did as well as *Juno* obviously. The films that were made about the Iraq war, let’s face it, did not do as well. But I’m telling you, if we stay the course and keep these movies in the theatres we can turn this around. I don’t care if it takes 100 years. Withdrawing the Iraq movies would only embolden the audience. We cannot let the audience win.

The popular perception that these films did not resonate with movie-goers is supported by American box office figures. *Home of the Brave* made just over

\$51 million, faring better than *Stop-Loss* (approximately \$10 million) and *In the Valley of Elah* (\$6,777,741). These takings are relatively small when compared with World War Two blockbusters like *Pearl Harbour* (Michael Bay, 2001) and *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998), which grossed theatre earnings of US\$198,542,544 and US\$216,540,909 respectively.¹ Despite modest box office returns, there was some critical recognition of these films, with *Home of the Brave* nominated for two awards in 2007 (a Golden Globe for Best Original Song and a Prism Award, which honours films depicting social issues). *In the Valley of Elah* picked up a prize in the same year at the Venice Film Festival (along with a nomination for the Golden Lion and an Oscar nomination in 2008 for actor Tommy Lee Jones) and *Stop-Loss* procured a Prism Award in 2009 in the category of Best Feature Film – Mental Health. *Redacted* won the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival and the Youth Jury Award at the Amnesty International Film Festival, along with nominations for various other prizes. The most lauded of all the Iraq War movies was *The Hurt Locker*, which won 6 Oscars, including those for Best Picture and Best Director in 2010. Interestingly the two most critically and economically successful of these films, *The Hurt Locker* (US\$16,400,000) and *Redacted* (US\$65 million), focus on the actions of American soldiers in Iraq, unlike the other three movies, which primarily centre on what happens to soldiers, their families and communities at ‘home’ in the USA on return from service.

Given the success of some of the films about the Iraq war made after September 11 and the relative failure of others, it would seem that there is something about *In the Valley of Elah*, *Stop-Loss* and *Home of the Brave*, beyond the war itself, that audiences are rejecting. Can this comparative absence of audience be understood in terms of indifference – something Baudrillard claims is a fundamental consequence of the Western globalising ideology? Why such audience indifference to stories of American soldiers irrevocably scarred by the experience of fighting this particular ‘war’? What is this indifference about? And where does it come from? Whilst cinema

¹ Box office figures cited throughout article retrieved from the Internet database *Box Office Mojo* on 13/07/2009 and 24/03/2010. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/>

distribution, promotion and marketing factors might help explain the lack of commercial success of recent Iraq War movies, we want to develop a different focus by bringing a number of Baudrillard's observations and analyses of the 'spirit of terrorism' to bear on this question of apparent audience indifference. While we cannot claim to definitively know what caused the failure of *Stop-Loss*, *In the Valley of Elah* and *Home of the Brave* – ours is not a paper investigating issues of cinematic genre and process, nor do we consider it the primary aim of this paper to find a concrete 'answer' to this question – we are fundamentally interested in the problem of indifference as a response to the challenge put forth by terrorism. In this sense, the indifference we are referring to is not one of personal dislike or disinterest, but rather a collective inability to respond to the terrorist event, hence an inability to meaningfully acknowledge and assimilate the trauma and loss that terrorism poses to the American way of life, as symbolised by the protagonists of the movies we analyse.

The Iraq War films we engage with here employ a number of melodramatic conventions – a trend Robyn Wiegman labelled 'missiles and melodrama' (1994) in the context of media depictions of the Persian Gulf War. This genre sees family, loss and separation featuring as concerns that are central to the contemporary experience of war. So, too, is there an emphasis on representing soldiers in domestic settings and personal relationships. As a result of this focus, there is little verbal or visual glorification of war in these accounts, with dialogue largely absent of the sarcastic irony or knowing wit employed so successfully in the Gulf War film *Three Kings* (David O. Russell, 1999) to critique the objectives of modern warfare. Stylistically, the films in question tend to follow standard Hollywood cinema convention characterised by narrative form, visual realism, linear plotlines and character development. Another shared feature of these movies is the high profile of their directors and leading actors, which include Charlize Theron, Susan Sarandon, Tommy Lee Jones, Ryan Phillippe and Samuel L. Jackson. The calibre of the cast and crew suggests a degree of Hollywood capital (economic and cultural) was invested in these movies.

Like other scholars assessing the role of the mass media in the ‘war on terror’, we acknowledge that ‘the production and suppression of images – their subsequent circulation and reception that have been so crucial to the representation and perception of the Iraq War – are not new developments’ (Grajeda 2006, 207). Movies dealing with the Gulf War, like *Three Kings*, *Courage Under Fire* (Edward Zwick, 1996) and *Jarhead* (Sam Mendes, 2005), question US motives for going to war and illuminate the virtualised nature of warfare as it is played out on media screens. While similar themes are present in a number of post-9/11 Iraq War films (indeed, these movies also share the concerns of films critiquing the Vietnam War like *The Deer Hunter* [Michael Cimino, 1978] with respect to the displacement and trauma experienced by war veterans), we contend that films of the post-September 11 milieu were produced and received in a contextual and historical climate quite different to their precursors, amidst the heightened anxiety of the ‘war on terror’ and after the collapse of the Twin Towers.

Our interest here is not with ‘interpreting’ these films in a critical sense in order to come to some definitive answer for the indifference shown towards them by the general public. Rather, we adopt a Baudrillardian logic, seeing our task as viewers as one of contemplating how we are being seduced, challenged, stupefied and analysed by these films. For Baudrillard, indifference is not only at the heart of the western culture, but it is also implicated fundamentally in the dynamics of the Iraq ‘war’. We refer here to his use of this term indifference as the utter banality that results from an implosion of oppositional constructs (1998, 74). Baudrillard analyses this implosion as symptomatic of, and integral to, the reality produced by a globalising political, psychological, signficatory and material economy that has become virtualised. As terms are no longer opposed, and certainly as they can no longer be reversed or exchanged in any sense, the resulting banality is one of a logic of non-differentiation, a loss of criteria. This is an indifference borne of an exclusive positivity that cannot contemplate its own reversion; as Baudrillard said in an interview with Philippe Petit, ‘Adam and Eve had

fallen into the moral anxiety of distinction; we have fallen into the immoral panic of indistinction, of the confusion of all criteria' (1998, 76).

Does the unpopularity of films like *In the Valley of Elah*, *Home of the Brave* and *Stop-Loss* tell us as non-audience something about our collective indifference? Can the films challenge and incite the viewer and at the same time generate or elicit indifference? Instead of the viewer's gaze constituting the sovereign site of interpretation and appropriation of the image through a masterful and interminable extraction of the film's meaning, we view the film rather more as the object that incites us, that enacts a look of the Other that sets desire in motion in ways that we precisely do not and cannot master or appropriate (Baudrillard 1984, 15). It is within the context of 9/11 responses to terrorism and understandings of the operations of the terrorist that we situate our discussion.

Baudrillard's hypothesis on terrorism

There is no question that the spectacular destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre (WTC) incited and ignited the attention of viewers worldwide, instigating what Baudrillard refers to as the Fourth World War (2003a, 12). For Baudrillard, war conducted in the aftermath of 9/11 is different to its predecessors. Unlike previous wars that put an end to colonial rule, Nazism and the cold war, the war on terror attempts to respond with force to a confrontation, an event, *the* event, (planes flown into the WTC) that is singular and symbolic. It is this symbolic, sacrificial dimension of the terrorist act that is especially problematic, if not impossible, for Western logic to comprehend.

Ironically, this 'symbolic' act is precisely devoid of meaning, with no objective (at least in terms of a Western cultural logic), and with no precedent. In Baudrillard's analysis, the paradox of the singularity of the event, as symbolic, is that it cannot be coded into a generalised system of exchange in terms of discourse, history, politics or war. In this sense it cannot be 'understood' but rather confronts a world, saturated with meaning and efficacy, with a form of reversion. The terrorist act as challenge is not a

challenge because of its spectacular violence, is not to be conceived in the oppositional terms of Islam and America,² but is rather an event that crystallises a ‘radical antagonism’ at the heart of the ‘integral reality’ of the West. The logic of a globalising West progresses through a relentless integration of any ‘other’ or any singularity. Baudrillard writes of the inability of the Americans to see the other as adversary in this sense of challenge (2003b, 66). Such an integrating construction of reality presents a technical and signifying realisation of the world that bars any countervailing force in its drive towards a complete global order. The WTC event as ‘radical antagonism’ is precisely such a countervailing force; an antagonism that Baudrillard argues lies in fact at the heart of the globalising West. This radical antagonism is a kind of death drive within ‘the system’ – the terrorist act did not by any means resolve this antagonism, but gave it a symbolic dimension. According to Baudrillard, it made it visible, gave it representational valence. In Baudrillard’s words ‘terrorism merely crystallizes all the ingredients in suspension’ (2003b, 59).

Baudrillard counterpoints what he calls this ‘sovereign’ hypothesis regarding the nature of terrorism, and the terrorist WTC event in particular, with a number of other competing hypotheses, each of which he dismisses. Can the event be conjured as an ‘incident’, a blip on the otherwise smooth trajectory of globalisation that is in fact irreversible? If this were the case the terrorist act would not be an event, but would be an accident that was integrated into the unifying trend to global power with its generalised exchange and single mode of thought. Against this Baudrillard proposes September 11 as an event that presents this generalised exchange of an integral reality with an impossible exchange. The event cannot be exchanged,

² We note that Žižek in his consideration of violence makes a distinction between the ‘terrorist pseudo-fundamentalists’ and a ‘divine violence’, which he claims ‘belongs to the order of the Event’ (2008, 172). The extent to which this distinction unsettles Baudrillard’s hypothesis on terrorism as he applies it to the attack on the WTC is beyond the scope of this paper, but important to note. Baudrillard’s claim in his ‘Hypotheses on Terrorism’ essay (2003b) that the WTC strike is not to be conceived within an opposition of Islam and America possibly echoes Levi-Strauss’s point in the final chapters of *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) where he analyses the hegemonic fundamentalism of Islam as the Occident of the Orient and thus incommensurate with the singularity of what Baudrillard would call societies of symbolic exchange.

cannot be thought in terms that absorb its challenge into the Western system of meaning. If it cannot be thought in these terms, if the event drains the possibility of such meaning, then the 'war on terror' will never be enacted as a meaningful response but will instead flounder in a discursive abyss.

Is the WTC event an act by suicidal fanatics who are driven and manipulated by an 'evil power'? This hypothesis is rejected by Baudrillard for a number of reasons. Through constructing the terrorist act as one that represents global misery and despair on the part of oppressed peoples, it effectively reduces it to a 'gesture of impotence' (2003b, 53). To suggest this is to assume that all oppositional violence is an epiphenomenon of the existing world order. Such an assumption is totalising in scope and ultimately hopeless. It gives no credence to the possibility of an 'event' as an irruption of a singularity, and this is a position Baudrillard refuses, arguing it cannot be accepted. Not unlike the previous hypothesis (reflecting an 'objective' complicity), the final hypothesis he considers as a contender proposes that terrorism in fact reflects a deep internal complicity of the power of terrorism and the power of the 'world order'. This complicity suggests that the terrorists seriously aim to destabilise the global order through their actions (blatantly absurd in Baudrillard's assessment): 'the global order is already the site of such disorder and deregulation that there is no point whatever in adding to it' (2003b, 55). On the contrary, in accord with Baudrillard's preferred analysis and hypothesis, it is precisely the manic and obsessive intensification of security and policing, that creates a 'veiled form of perpetual terror'. This, he argues, is the real victory of this terrorist act: 'forcing the west to terrorize itself' (2003b, 81). It is at this point that we turn to the recent suite of films about the Iraq War – *Home of the Brave*, *Stop-Loss* and *In the Valley of Elah* – that offer a critical point of departure to consider the ideas of Jean Baudrillard as he discusses the counterpoint of the challenge of the terrorist act and the abjection of the West's response to it.

Trauma of an Impossible 'War'

So at Ground Zero, in the rubble of global power, we can only, despairingly, find our own image (Baudrillard 2003b, 59).

Baudrillard's contention that the West cannot contemplate sacrificial death pervades these films. As we near the end of *Stop-Loss* soldier gone AWOL, Brandon King, confesses to his friend Michelle that his original motivations for enlisting – to protect his country and family from the spectre of terrorism – were misguided: 'We wanted payback for 9/11 and you get there and you realise the war wasn't even about any of that'. Rather, for Brandon, war is no longer a fight against the terrorists but an act of trying to keep yourself (as well as your friends and innocent civilians) alive. This process of survival involves working out who the enemy is. Yet Brandon cannot clearly discern who is his target, with the killing of Iraqi civilians preying on his mind. As he recounts shooting a man holding a child in his arms and a grenade in his hand (shown as a flashback sequence), the traumatised Brandon insists to Michelle that he is done with killing.

The anxiety and abjection invoked by the collapse of a discernable system of values (which Brandon, as a US soldier, is supposed to represent) along with his personal beliefs, is invoked again when Brandon fights with buddy Steve after the military funeral of their mutual friend Tommy, who committed suicide. Instead of fighting the 'enemy', Brandon finds himself 'at war' with his friends and the American army that he has deserted. A distressed Brandon reveals that his reluctance to go back to Iraq is because he 'fucked up' – a failure that is manifest on a number of levels. As group commander, Sargent King was incapable of preventing the death of his fellow soldiers. More profoundly, perhaps, this failure can be understood as an erosion of the self that occurs when the fight against terrorism rebounds and reverses in on the subject. For to counter terrorism Brandon must take up its symbolic challenge – a challenge that, according to Baudrillard, demands no objectives and no meaning. It is a challenge that Brandon cannot sustain. For Boris Groys, writing on the nature of terrorism as informed by Baudrillard,

‘claiming not only to betray one’s inner qualities, but saying that one does not have any, is another level of escalation of the betrayal against oneself, another way of sacrificing oneself within the symbolic economy – to confess that one has failed at every level’ (2005, 6). This revelation is at the heart of Brandon going AWOL. It is also at the heart of the West’s powerlessness to respond to the terrorist challenge – a challenge that calls for a mode of sacrificial death that runs counter to West’s overwhelming investment in the positivity of accumulated ‘life’.

Baudrillard explains the Western mindset in terms of a zero death system – ‘a system that operates on the basis of the exclusion of death, a system whose ideal is an idea of zero deaths’ (2003a, 16). This notion is characterised most visibly by the West’s approach to modern warfare as a technological, virtual exercise, where bodies become abstracted into targets on a screen or collateral damage, thereby concealing death (see Baudrillard 1995). In comparison, the terrorists (including those responsible for 9/11) push the limits of this system, using their own deaths as a visible, spectacular ‘counterstrike weapon’ (2003a, 16) that the West can’t match because their culture and values promote the preservation of life (and the American way of life) above all else. Whether this is or is not actually the case is of little consequence, as it is the value system the West is based upon that is being challenged here. In the terms of this challenge, ‘death’ refers to more than the loss of actual human lives, but rather to ‘a death which is symbolic and sacrificial – that is to say, the absolute, irrevocable event’ (Baudrillard 2003a, 17).

Even though combat medals are awarded to soldiers like Brandon King (in *Stop-Loss*) and Jordan Owen (in *Home of the Brave*) and funerals with full military honours are held for dead soldiers (suggesting that military service is recognised and valued), these gestures are ultimately empty. America’s preoccupation with publicly valorising soldiers who died protecting their country can only ever be a simulation of honour – rituals that generate the illusion of dignity and respect to mask the loss of dignity that Groys argues sits at the core of America’s response to terrorism (2005,

6). In the military funeral sequences, the American flags draping Tommy (*Stop-Loss*) and Jordan's (*Home of the Brave*) coffins are presented to their families, while Mike (*In the Valley of Elah*) mails his father Hank an American flag, which Hank receives at the end of the film after his son has died. What is traumatic about these events is not simply the death of these US soldiers, but the realisation that the sacrifice of going to war to fight the terrorist enemy is not in fact a sacrifice, but merely an abject 'waste' – as meaningless as the American flags given to the loved ones of the departed, no longer steadfastly representing the values they were fighting for. In this sense the abjection that pervades these films can be understood as resulting from the inability of the war in Iraq to respond to the atrocities of 9/11 in a way that is a response to the symbolic singularity of the event, or of the challenge of the terrorist act.

In his 'Hypotheses on Terrorism' (2003b) Baudrillard proposes that 'the question is that of the Real.' It is not clear entirely what he intends by this. He goes on to refer to Slavoj Žižek's claim that 'the passion of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is the eschatological passion for the Real, the nostalgic passion for that lost or disappearing object' (Baudrillard 2003b, 75). Baudrillard then suggests that if this is the case, the terrorists could be said to be responding to 'this pathetic demand for reality,' and on the contrary, the irruption of a singularity as a response to the "integrist" offensive of the global system', has, 'for its part, nothing to do with the Real'. There are some conceptual differences here that are useful to unravel to be able to briefly introduce what psychoanalyst Colette Soler has to write about trauma, which, we argue, is intimately connected with the films and our questions for this essay.

Žižek (2002) is clearly referring to the Lacanian Real; something Baudrillard misinterprets as 'reality' in the Lacanian lexicon. In fact, the Real is far more akin to Baudrillard's concept of singularity, and if this is the case, then possibly the symbolic 'event' has everything to do with the trauma of the Real. Soler has analysed our era as the 'era of traumatism' (2005, 75). She argues that in the West, our resistance to trauma is being progressively

weakened. When the cultural ‘basis of stable significations [is] shared by all, and social links are orderly, subjects are much less exposed to the [R]eal, and its most brutal breakthroughs are neutralised by the envelope of meaning that discourse creates’ (2005, 23). She contrasts this to our current era where ‘the boat of discourse leaks’ and there is no way of sealing it. From her Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, there is ‘no limit to the horror that a consistent discourse will tame’ (2005, 45). As any consistent and socially-binding discourse about the meaningfulness of violence, even atrocity and ‘war’, dissipates from the social domain, discourse no longer keeps the trauma of the Real at bay.

This discursive rupture is witnessed in the final scenes of *In the Valley of Elah*, framed by a key sequence early on in the film. At the start of the movie Hank spots an American flag flying upside down while driving to his son’s barracks. When he pulls over to rectify this ‘mistake’, he asks the El Salvadorian man responsible for raising the flag whether he knows what it means when a flag flies upside down. ‘It’s an international distress signal’, says Hank, ‘It means we are in a whole lot of trouble so come save our ass because we don’t have a prayer in hell of saving ourselves’. As this stage in the movie, Hank’s ‘reality’ is yet to be shattered – he has an unquestioning faith in his country and its motives for war. The gesture of turning the flag the right way up implies that Hank remains buffered from the ‘distress’ and futility that responding to the terrorist challenge generates in the Western psyche. Like his neighbours who fly the American flag proudly in their front gardens, the social discourse around the ‘war on terror’ gives the Iraq war meaning and legitimacy for Hank and his wife.

By the end of the film, however, things have changed. Hank returns to this flagpole to erect the tattered American flag belonging to his soldier son Mike, which he raises upside down and tapes firmly in place so it cannot be moved. He now knows that the son he was searching for at the outset of the movie is dead – killed not while fighting the terrorist threat but in a way that is meaningless and incomprehensible. Mike was murdered on American soil at the hands of his fellow soldiers. These soldiers, traumatised themselves by

the futility of their actions in Iraq, and Hank, traumatised by Mike's nonsensical death, respond as they do when the symbolic nature of terrorist violence cannot be absorbed, cannot be bounded within a discourse of their social bond. Order (by way of American values, power) cannot be restored and the West cannot beat terrorism by means of its current strategy (force and humiliation). Like Baudrillard, Hank realises that 'we don't have a prayer in hell of saving ourselves' if we go down this path, hence he raises the American flag the wrong way up to signal the distress brought about by the abjection and impotence of this impossibility, and the loss of American values that accompanies it. There appears to be no answer to the terrorist sacrifice embodied by 9/11. When the threat of the other cannot be countered or absorbed, we witness a reversion of the system upon itself – the West terrorises itself.

Perhaps the most telling sequences to invoke the West's utter failure to counter the terrorist's symbolic challenge, hence terrorise the self, occur as soldiers who managed to make it out alive from Iraq die on American soil. In *Home of the Brave* Jamal takes his ex-girlfriend hostage as a result of being traumatised by shooting an Iraqi woman in an ambush, which manifest as anger and frustration for the lack of support and recognition for returned service men and women. In the hostage ordeal he is shot and killed by the police. *Stop-Loss* depicts the suicide of Tommy after being rejected by his wife and the army, who discharge him because of his uncontrollable drinking. This suicide, however, challenges no other; it represents rather a kind of armed force cannibalising itself. The death of the returned soldier is most fully invoked by *In the Valley of Elah*, which centres on the soldier gone AWOL, Mike Deerfield and the mystery surrounding his death. In this film, it is the soldiers who served with Mike in Iraq who stab him on the side of the road over some trivial dispute. This humiliation – of *not* dying while protecting your country, a humiliation inflicted by America on itself – is symptomatic of the kind of abjection Baudrillard observes is manifest in the 'war against terror'. Writing about Abu Ghraib, Baudrillard suggests that the images emerging from Baghdad prisons of ritual humiliation and torture of

the enemy by American soldiers reveal that war is not about killing the enemy but simulating power through the circulation of degrading, banal and abject images (Baudrillard 2005, 206). American soldiers become degraded themselves through their encounters with the enemy, leading to abject feelings of helplessness and despair and, ultimately, the brutal acts that result in the death of soldiers like Jamal, Tommy and Mike.

Sequences of video taken from Mike's mobile phone, which appear throughout *In the Valley of Elah*, powerfully demonstrate the manner by which degradation of the other is an insufficient strategy to respond to, let alone eradicate terrorism, and can lead only to degradation of the self. The video footage shows Mike and his fellow soldiers in Iraq as they encounter the burned bodies of Iraqis. There is a gratuitousness to their documentation of this spectacle – one soldier places a sticker of a cartoonish smiling red devil on the skull of one of the corpses. In doing so he seeks to humiliate the other – mocking their death and rendering it insignificant and trivial in an attempt to reclaim some semblance of power over the terrorist/other who abolished the West's sense of security and authority during 9/11. Yet we see this humiliation of the other turning back on itself when those very same American soldiers mutilate and burn Mike's body in a way that echoes the deaths they witnessed in Iraq. In murdering one of their own, the American soldier suffers the degradation and shame of his actions, rather than its target (the terrorist).

Trauma, in Soler's writing, is an excess of the Real, an irruption of the Real, an invasion by images, noises and sensations impossible to endure, impossible to assimilate (and also impossible to avoid). Surely there is something of this in the films: as viewers we witness the abject meaninglessness of the Iraq invasion and occupation when a national, collective narrative of an enemy being fought by brave American soldiers protecting American values is so comprehensively lost, and unable to be retrieved or assembled in any form. The returned soldiers depicted in these movies quickly come to realise this, as the US government, institutions and wider publics cannot meaningfully acknowledge or comprehend what has

occurred to them. This ‘radical indifference’, this failure to invoke a heroic discourse of the returned soldier is witnessed in *Home of the Brave*, which explores what life is like for four returned soldiers – Will Marsh (played by Samuel L. Jackson), Vanessa Price (Jessica Biel), Tommy Yates (Brian Presley) and Jamal Aikin (rapper 50 Cent).

Vanessa, whose jeep was ambushed and blown up only weeks before she was scheduled to go home, must learn to survive with the horrific injuries she sustained in the attack. Now an amputee, Vanessa has lost not only her right arm, but her relationship with her partner and the support of her family and friends. Whilst her loved ones try to reach out to her, she avoids them because she feels she can no longer relate to them (nor can they understand her) after the war. She experiences frustration and a loss of dignity and independence on returning to work as a high school sports teacher, as she is incapable of undertaking once-easy tasks like retrieving a soccer ball or carrying a box of books. While Vanessa does start a new relationship at the end of the film, suggesting she might build a new life, other returned soldiers are not so fortunate.

Tommy shares Vanessa’s loss of connection with the people and places he longed to return to whilst on duty. Like Vanessa, he can’t sleep, he is on medication, and the relationship with his partner has broken down. He can’t get his old job back and his father accuses him of being a ‘pussy’ for suggesting he’d like to talk to someone about the feelings he is having. For Tommy – who loses his friend Jamal, loses sleep, loses his job, loses peace of mind, loses control of his emotions, loses his girlfriend and loses the respect of his father – the only foreseeable resolution is to re-enlist. It is a path also chosen by Brandon King in *Stop-Loss*. These films remind us that it is American soldiers who are the losers in the mission of accumulation of life, goods and security, whereas the terrorists enigmatically destroy and disappear in their sacrificial gestures.

So, too, does the American way of life these soldiers once enjoyed and sought to protect no longer make sense to them – a ‘way of life’ characterised by people driving their SUVs and drinking frappuchinos, as Vanessa bitterly

notes. She feels that she can no longer relate to this trivial existence, nor the American people, who ‘don’t give a shit about what is going on back there’. She, along with the other returned soldiers in *Home of the Brave*, regularly make mention of the fact that they should be grateful for what they have as American citizens, yet feel lost as they realise that a ‘Starbucks and SUV’ lifestyle has come to represent the ‘American values’ they fought to defend (over and above the notion of human rights and dignity). Baudrillard writes of this indifference towards any such American values by Americans:

The terrorists are making an attack upon a system of integral reality by an act which has, in the very moment of its perpetration, neither true meaning nor reference in another world. The aim is simply to wreck the system – itself indifferent to its own values – by means of its own weapons [...] the key arm they appropriate, and turn to decisive effect, is the non-meaning and indifference which are at the heart of the system (Baudrillard 2003b, 73).

Taking Baudrillard’s evocation of singularity, and his view of the symbolic nature of the terrorist act as an act that cannot be exchanged with any equivalent or any representational signification, if we introduce Soler’s analysis, we see that this effectively invokes a trauma and its inevitable avoidance. Baudrillard disdains and critiques the contemporary era of the West for its integrist offensive saturated with ‘meaning’ (whose very saturation creates the non-meaning he refers to in the citation above), making the terrorist act one of reversion that, in its very meaninglessness symbolises the radical antagonism that lurks ‘in suspension’ at the heart of that integral reality. Soler (in accord with other Lacanian psychoanalytic writers), might view the contemporary era with a similar disdain and critique, yet she highlights rather the role of social discourse, signifiatory coherence, as one that buffers the speaking subject from the trauma of the Real. For both Baudrillard and Soler, the terrorist act might be a challenge that cannot be assimilated. For Baudrillard, this symbolic event is deeply challenging precisely in its irreducibility and the impossibility of its absorption into frames of ‘meaning’; with Soler we see how ‘exposure’ to

such a 'challenge' can be traumatic particularly when the coordinates of meaning are leaking and dissipating from the social.

For neither Baudrillard nor Soler can the trauma be made to conform to the nominalisation of 'post-traumatic stress disorder' – the convenient label offered to explain the actions and feelings of the returned soldier, which their friends, family and wider society cannot otherwise acknowledge. For both Baudrillard and Soler we see an opening onto the inevitability of the abject nature of the West's response that follows. For Baudrillard because the West cannot 'think' a sacrificial gesture and the nobility it suggests (he sees a reversal in the Master-Slave relationship with the observation that the Master is now the terrorist who can die, where death is a challenge and a stake, whereas representatives of the West are in the position of the Slave who is condemned to survival and labour).³ For Soler it is traumatisation that leads to this abjection. For both there is no transcendent truth in the terrorist act: for Baudrillard because the nature of the act means such a truth doesn't by definition exist, for Soler because the poverty of our collective discursive resources mean we do not and cannot create one.

While acknowledging the pointless nature of any attempt to reconcile Baudrillardian critique with a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, what we have attempted here is to draw out some contact points where they might arguably not be solely viewed as two parallel lines of inquiry and argument that never cross, but instead spark and ignite some new insight. Indeed, Baudrillard is fiercely critical of the generalised code of exchange that creates modern, Western semiology and a political economy of the sign that generates a fundamental indifference. Certainly, this is not a Lacanian project. Through introducing the reflections of Soler on the contemporary nature of trauma and the exposure to the real through cracks appearing in the veil of discourse, we have endeavoured to bring both indifference and trauma into this discussion of the films, the abjection they depict, and the disappearance of the audience.

³ Interestingly, Soler also refers to Henry V's attack on the absence of death as a stake and a challenge through a reading of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, noting that 'today's suicide bomb-carriers bring back its full relevance' (2005, 37).

Indifference and the Absence of the Audience

Various sequences within these films gesture toward the West's collective indifference, an indifference Baudrillard proposes is borne of an intensification of uncertainty, a loss of moral or political bearings that accompanies an implosion of differential constructs. Distinctions implode, their coordinates recede, and stakes become impossible to define. In *Home of the Brave* doctor Will Marsh is confronted by his wife late one night demanding to know what happened to him whilst serving in Iraq. Aware that she is seeking some explanation for his detached behaviour, Marsh proclaims 'you want us to come back like nothing ever happened, you'll only get your hands dirty with the details'. Nor does she *really* want to know, despite her concern for her husband's difficulty in adjusting back into his 'normal' life. Hank, the main protagonist of *In the Valley of Elah* and the father of returned soldier Mike, also denies the stakes of the symbolic challenge put forth by terrorism and its consequences, refusing to comprehend that those men who fought alongside his son could be implicated in his death. When detective Emily Sanders presents him with this possibility, he counters by responding that 'they didn't do it...they were blowing off steam. You have not been to war, so you are not going to understand this. You do not fight beside a man and then do that to him'. For to understand the failure of the war as its very impossibility is to confront the fragility and potential collapse of our Western civilisation, to contemplate its own implosion, like the Twin Towers. To witness an inability to respond to this 'radical antagonism' is to recognise it all too well in the rubble at Ground Zero. Maybe it is the reluctance to face this possibility that is mirrored by the indifference of cinema-going audiences.

While the movies in question highlight the personal sacrifices made by American soldiers, symbolically, their trauma, suffering and deaths (as they are represented in these films and other media) elicited little impact or response from American or other citizens of the 'free world' (or Islamic terrorists, for that matter!). The stories told in these films have not stopped

the war. Nor have audiences watched these films in such large numbers or with the same degree of horror as elicited by the terrorist attacks on the WTC, despite them depicting the American 'response' to the challenge posed by terrorism. Yet terrorism has no meaning, according to Baudrillard. That is why it is an event, why it shocks us (Baudrillard 2003b, 57). In comparison, filmic depictions of the war in Iraq generate indifference by confronting us with non-meaning and abjection, with our own indifference that we'd rather not see. Known parameters of understanding and frames of reference (such as the notion of post-traumatic stress disorder) are not adequate to explain the trauma experienced by the soldiers. Nor can we absorb or accommodate this excess of the Real, as Soler observes. With Baudrillard, her analysis reminds us that the West's strategy to neutralise this trauma is avoidance by way of indifference.

The subject matter of *Stop-Loss*, *In the Valley of Elah* and *Home of the Brave* delivers an uncompromising deflation of any possible rationale for the American military presence in Iraq, or any possible mythologising of the troops and their heroic mission. Instead, soldiers who were at the frontline of the armed struggle against the 'war on terror' in Iraq ultimately 'lose out' as a consequence of fighting for their country and its values of freedom and democracy. They lose the co-ordinates of meaning through which to make sense of 'what is right', and determine who the 'enemy' is that they are fighting against. The non-place and non-status of the 'failed' war hero, both in the American imagination and in the soldier's own psyche, elicits a radical indifference from the West who cannot acknowledge the impossibility of a response to the symbolic singularity of the terrorist event while it is framed in the Western cultural logic it precisely challenges and reverses. It could be said that the failure of these films echoes the futility of America's military response to terrorism when compared with the 9/11 attacks, described by Baudrillard as 'an initial impact causing incalculable consequences...the American's massive deployments...achieved only derisory effects – the

hurricane ending, so to speak, in the beating of a butterfly's wing' (2003a, 23).

Bibliography

Baudrillard, Jean (1984) *The Evil Demon of Images*. Sydney: Power Institute Publications.

Baudrillard, Jean (1995) *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Baudrillard, Jean (1998) *Paroxysm. Interviews with Philippe Petit*. London and New York: Verso.

Baudrillard, Jean (2003a) "The Spirit of Terrorism" in *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*. London and New York: Verso, 1 – 34.

Baudrillard, Jean (2003b) "Hypotheses on Terrorism" in *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*. London and New York: Verso, 51 – 83.

Baudrillard, Jean (2005) "War Porn" in *The Conspiracy of Art, Jean Baudrillard: Manifestos, Interviews, Essays*. Ed. Sylvère Lotringer. New York and Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 205 – 209.

Bush, George W. (2003) "President Discusses Beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom". Office of the White House, 22 March. [<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030322.html>]. Accessed 17 August 2009.

Dunmire, Patricia L. (2009) "'9/11 Changed Everything': An Intertextual Analysis of the Bush Doctrine". *Discourse and Society*, v. 20, n. 2: 195 – 222.

Grajeda, Tony (2006) "Picturing Torture: Gulf Wars Past and Present" in *Rethinking Global Security: Media, Popular Culture, and the 'War on Terror'*. Eds. Andrew Martin and Patrice Petro. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 206 – 235.

Groys, Boris (2005) "The Bodies of Abu Ghraib". *Site*, v. 15: 6.

Klare, Michael T. (2003) "For Oil and Empire? Rethinking War with Iraq". *Current History*, v. 102, n. 662: 129 – 35.

Levi-Strauss, Claude (1955) *Tristes Tropiques*. Paris: Series Terre Humaine, Plon.

- No author (2003) National Strategy for Combating Terrorism. Office of the White House, 14 February.
[<http://georgewbushwhitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030214-7.html>]. Accessed 17 August 2009.
- Soler, Colette (2005) *The Era of Traumatism*. Translated by Berti Glaubach. Rome: Biblink Editori.
- Wiegman, Robyn (1994) "Missiles and Melodrama (Masculinity and the Televisual War)" in *Seeing Through the Media: The Persian Gulf War*. Eds. S Jeffords and Linda Rabinovitz. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 171 – 187.
- Žižek, Slavoj (2002) *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* New York: Verso.
- Žižek, Slavoj (2008) *Violence. Six Sideways Reflections*. London: Profile Books.

Filmography

- Bay, Michael (2001) *Pearl Harbour*. USA.
- Bigelow, Kathryn (2008) *The Hurt Locker*. USA.
- Broomfield, Nick (2007) *Battle for Haditha*. USA.
- Cimino, Michael (1978) *The Deer Hunter*. USA.
- Coppola, Francis Ford (1979) *Apocalypse Now*. USA.
- De Palma, Brian (2007) *Redacted*. USA.
- Haggis, Paul (2007) *In the Valley of Elah*. USA.
- Mendes, Sam (2005) *Jarhead*. USA.
- Peirce, Kimberly (2008) *Stop-Loss*. USA.
- Redford, Robert (2007) *Lions for Lambs*. USA.
- Russell, David O (1999) *Three Kings*. USA.
- Spielberg, Steven (1998) *Saving Private Ryan*. USA.
- Winkler, Irwin (2006) *Home of the Brave*. USA.
- Zwick, Edward (1996) *Courage Under Fire*. USA.