American War Adventure and the Generic Pleasures of Military Violence: Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper*

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"ADVENTURE" IS A WORD USED IN THE NONACADEMIC WORLD for something fun or unusual, as well as being a scholarly term for an archetypal story (Frye; Cawelti), a modern narrative of colonial violence or capitalist enterprise (Green, *Dreams*), and a genre of nineteenth-century British fiction (Kestner). Adventure should also be understood as a narrative *mode* that organizes stories and representations in contemporary popular culture, structuring meaning and affect in narratives featuring violence in a way similar to how melodrama organizes meaning and affect in narratives featuring suffering (Williams; Elsaesser; Brooks). According to Linda Williams, melodrama comprises a family of narrative features meant to create sympathetic identification with a virtuous victim (29). The pleasures of melodrama involve a complex play of intradiegetic misrecognitions and discoveries of the moral identity of key characters but especially the victimized hero or heroine. Adventure functions in an analogous way, but the main pleasures derive from identification with a hero successfully confronting danger and violence. The "basic moral fantasy implicit in this type of story," John G. Cawelti asserts, is "victory over death" (40). Ideologically, adventure can assume a range of political configurations, including progressive ones, as there is no inherent political coloring to stories about overcoming great challenges. Historically, however, adventure writing—both fictional and nonfictional—has been closely aligned with the colonial and imperial projects of modern nation states, casting

these as exotic backdrops for white male feats of prowess and domination through violence committed in the name of a settler or so-called civilizing project (Green, *Dreams*; Dawson).

Although adventure is sometimes associated with boys' fiction of the nineteenth century or highly formulaic genres like the Western, in the twenty-first century the adventure mode is present in a wider range of forms and media than ever (Green, *Seven Types*; Cawelti). It is particularly relevant for understanding the way war is represented in the context of today's neoliberal political and cultural economy. Although the adventure mode obviously shapes film genres like fantasy and action, it also informs a wide range of war narratives, including nonfictional works like memoirs or documentaries. Most commercial war films—no matter how historical, biographical, or realistic—follow an adventure narrative arc that ultimately presents the hero-protagonist as not only surviving but more mature and somehow better for his encounter with death and violence. This is true even for allegedly realistic war films, such as Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* (2014)*.* Commercial war films inevitably portray combat and military service as appealing, and *American Sniper* is no exception.

Yet the ongoing violence in multiple theaters of operation and the large numbers of veterans returning from the wars in the Middle East with an array of mental problems and injuries suggest that a far more cautious approach to enlistment would be appropriate. The fact that young men and women continue to volunteer despite the questionable status and outcome of these engagements is testimony to the powerful role of the media and especially of narrative film in shaping cultural representations of distant wars. Hollywood continues to directly or indirectly promote militarism, as it has done since the beginning of the twentieth century, and *American Sniper* serves as a useful example of the mechanisms by which the adventure mode makes war appear attractive because it was both a critical and a box office success. The film earned the most of any film in 2014 and of any war film of all time (Epstein). *American Sniper* is also a useful example because some reviewers actually described the film as critical of war despite its having been based on the legendary sniper Chris Kyle's jingoistic memoir. For example, reviewing the film in *The New Yorker*, David Denby described *American Sniper* as "a devastating antiwar movie, a subdued celebration of a warrior's skill and a

sorrowful lament over his alienation and misery." CNN's Deah Obei-dallah called it "a cautionary tale for Americans about why we must avoid war." Clint Eastwood himself claimed that the film constitutes an "antiwar statement" because it looks at "what {war} does to the family and the people who have to go back into civilian life like Chris Kyle did" (qtd. in Kilday).

Nevertheless, the film hews closely to the adventure mode and fails to demystify or question combat, instead depicting its hero's violence as both moral and potentially pleasurable. *American Sniper* presents the experience of combat as an exciting battle between forces of right and wrong, and it asks us to feel empathetic pity for its protagonist-hero, as well as admiration for his martial feats. It deviates little from the war adventure formula as it was developed in the imperial wars of the nineteenth century, pitting agents of white civilization against so-called savages in a dangerous frontier zone. Chris Kyle is portrayed as an idealized American, literally a cowboy, who discovers his talent for deploying righteous violence in an apolitical theater of combat where good American soldiers battle sadistic and evil Iraqis. Although Kyle's struggle with PTSD acknowledges that killing others and watching friends die takes a toll on a soldier, the film ultimately depicts the pleasures of combat as not only worth the price but as offering unexpected rewards in the form of a greater maturity. Kyle's unfortunate and biographically required death at the hands of a disturbed fellow veteran does little to diminish the impression conveyed by the film as a whole that being a sniper is heroic, meaningful, and rewarding. The ending is ultimately less about Kyle's death than an explicit and public celebration of his life's work as a professional killer.

American Sniper falls into a larger recent trend of more positive portrayals of war (Westwell 89; Boggs and Pollard 331) and more specifically of a highly nationalistic and essentialist view of the conflict in the Middle East (Binns 88). Numerous scholars have noted the rise in militaristic Hollywood fare since the 1990s, often focusing on World War II (e.g., *Saving Private Ryan*, *Flags of Our Fathers*, and *Fury*), as well as the fascination with Special Forces and special operations of all kinds (e.g., *Black Hawk Down*, *Lone Survivor*, and *Zero Dark Thirty*; see Gibson). *American Sniper* takes place in Fallujah, but its scenes of urban warfare are so generic that it could be happening in any war-torn city (and were filmed mostly on sets in California and Morocco).

While its reverential portrayal of its warrior-protagonist is not unusual among contemporary war films, its gritty hand-held camera aesthetics and dutiful depiction of Kyle's brief bout with symptoms of PTSD lend the film an appearance of realism and possibly critical intent. Teasing out the features of the film that belong to the adventure mode and that organize its rhetorical and ideological vectors helps bring its precise mechanisms of glamorization and enchantment, or the process of imbuing violence with moral sense and cultural potency that Sarah Cole describes in *The Violet Hour*,[1] into focus.

The larger context for these questions of how war is represented includes the ongoing American military intervention in the Middle East (and Africa and other regions), which seems likely to continue into the future. It is important to see the myriad ways in which war is marketed, glamorized, and legitimated and how it has become such an unquestioned part of American life that even a thoughtful director like Eastwood falls into overt cliché in his treatment of it. The patently obvious fact that these wars are far more about resources (especially oil) than about "defending America" (aside from American corporate interests) is never considered. Instead, the misleading claim made by the Bush administration in 2003 that Iraq was somehow linked to terrorist attacks on the United States is tacitly and uncritically recycled. Although Eastwood, as a director, has on occasion been hailed for a seemingly more critical approach to the film genres that made him famous—in films such as the revisionist Western *The Unforgiven*—many scholars have also noted the limitations of Eastwood's seeming reformation (Plangina; Modleski). Just as the protagonist of that supposedly revisionist Western falls back into his earlier violent ways, Eastwood also does not stray very far from the pleasures of imagining killing bad guys without qualm or conscience.

While the World War II diptych *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* attempted to look at the invasion of Iwo Jima with equal sympathy for soldiers on both sides, that even-handedness is gone in this excursion into the war in Iraq. All Iraqis, men, women, and even children, are portrayed as cruel, greedy, or naturally violent. The "causes" of the war—and of Kyle's commitment to it—are portrayed through a series of news reports of terrorist attacks on US embassies and locations, including 9/11, collapsing the entire Middle East into one violent crucible of evil-doers who wish to kill

Americans. Eastwood's answer to this onslaught of attacks in the film is to propose a war of attrition—Kyle's goal being to kill as many Iraqi insurgents as possible—and never ask why they keep coming. By representing Middle Easterners in this way, Eastwood's film contributes to the forever wars in the region. The adventure genre that shapes the film's narrative movement also helps to legitimate this relentless deployment of military violence by making it seem meaningful and justified.

Adventurers and the Adventure Matrix

Technically, adventure is probably among the very oldest human narrative genres and dates back to the basic story of the warrior's exploits or the man who travels away from the group and returns alive (Campbell). As Martin Green points out in *Seven Types of Adventure Tale*, adventure tends to take place at the margins of the known world, in borderlands, or frontiers where the laws of the law-promulgating center are relaxed, which permits the hero to confront racially marked Others who become either subordinated allies or irredeemable enemies (36). The dichotomy of civilization/savagery is at the heart of the adventure tale and its investment in moral violence. Sometimes violence takes a back seat to other kinds of civilizing missions, and Green argues that *Robinson Crusoe* can be counted among the earliest and most important modern adventure tales, especially with regard to its foregrounding of Protestantism, colonialism, capitalism, and masculinity (*Robinson Crusoe Story* 47).

There are, of course, a range of adventure stories, not all of which involve war or even violence, but most tend to pit the hero against some wild or natural or savage adversary, which he overcomes by violence or outsmarts through his naturally superior wits. In the modern era, as the adventure tale has developed in the Anglo-American context, white masculinity is often at the heart of the story, even if that whiteness is sometimes seen as needing to "borrow" characteristics from its racial Others in order to more effectively combat them (Kaplan). Hence, adventure heroes such as James Fennimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo, Timothy Flint's Daniel Boone, Stephen Crane's Henry Fleming, Lowell Thomas's Lawrence of Arabia, and Robin Moore's Green Berets, often display savagery of their own (Slotkin).

This ability to draw on the more "primitive" and "savage" features of the adversary—especially in moments of violence—makes the adventure hero a formidable warrior, one able to be ruthless and cruel while retaining the moral purity of whiteness by having violence seen as a "native" characteristic adopted strategically by the hero in order to combat a ruthless enemy.

As many film scholars have noted, American cinema has a long-standing fascination with war adventure. The earliest films made in the United States include restagings of charges during the Spanish-American war, as well as nostalgic retellings of the Civil War, such as D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915). One of the most successful war adventure films of the twentieth century was *Sergeant York* (1941), which told the story of reluctant soldier Alvin York and his talent for killing despite his concern about the first commandment. Arguably, this is the type of hero that Americans love the most—one who displays great skill at violence while keeping his moral righteousness and innocence intact through religious or other convictions. During World War II, Hollywood produced a great number of propagandistic war films, and the collaboration between the military and cinema industry has continued to be strong in the postwar era (Boggs and Pollard).

What emerges with particular force in the Vietnam era is a fascination with the irregular soldier: the Green Beret, the Army Ranger, and the special or covert operations soldier. The appeal of this figure is that he wields the legitimate violence of the state while appearing to operate outside of the emasculating rules and protocols of military bureaucracy. He is trained to be independent, individualistic—a maverick—and therefore lends himself to the narrative needs of the adventure mode far better than the dutiful infantryman. One could say that the cult of the irregular soldier is inaugurated in the postwar context by Robin Moore's bestselling book *The Green Berets* (1965), reinforced by the John Wayne adaptation of the book into film in 1968 and continues with a wide range of films—some purely commercial, some more critical or ambitious—like *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Top Gun* (1986), and more recently, *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Act of Valor* (2012), and *Lone Survivor* (2013).

James William Gibson argues that this interest in the irregular soldier took on greater momentum in the 1980s, as part of a larger

cultural drive to "overcome" the humiliation of the Vietnam War. Gibson sees this new "highly energized culture of war and the warrior" as squarely "paramilitary" in its focus (9). The new warrior fought alone or with a small band of men and was both elite (superior to other soldiers) and potentially available for identification by any man because he was not a professional soldier or policeman. He was, in fact, a fantasy figure—a larger-than-life commando—a figure of great and possibly superhuman power (one can think of Rambo and his wholly improbable feats of mayhem).

Gibson identifies the paramilitary hero as an outgrowth not only of the defeat in Vietnam but the societal and economic changes in the 1980s, many of which made American men feel powerless in their own lives. The paramilitary hero served as an avatar of potency and power that few men felt in any way.[2] One could go further and see the paramilitary hero, as he gathered momentum in the 1980s and 90s, as a corollary of (and compensatory fantasy for) the neoliberal policies which were reconfiguring the economy and making work and workers more precarious. *American Sniper* can be situated squarely in this trend, with its protagonist depicted as an idealized instance of American manhood: Kyle is a small-town boy, Christian but not pious (his theft of a Bible from a church displays a perfect mixture of respect and irreverence), a successful cowboy, a patient lover and loyal husband, a playful but protective dad, and finally, a lethal warrior who quickly becomes a "legend" among his peers.

A larger-than-life figure of potency and highly effective violence, Kyle is also the perfect warrior for a neoliberal age. Not interested in politics, the Iraqi people, or the meaning of his mission, he wants to "get the job done" and that job just happens to be killing as many "savages" as he can, either alone or with one spotter, exercising his unusual gift for accuracy when the target is "breathing." Moreover the large number of kills he can accumulate over his four tours gives him an air of professionalism, as does his calm and matter-of-fact demeanor while he is "working." This is not a warrior lost in an orgy of violence. This is a man methodically exterminating enemies for a living. The insidious genius of the film is to make this work look both serious and ultimately satisfying.

The Strategic Ambiguity of Popular Culture

The contemporary war film lies at the intersection of several competing logics. On the one hand, it is a business investment for a studio and needs to appeal as broadly as possible to a diverse audience in order to recoup its producers' investment capital. On the other hand, if it wants to be taken seriously as a "realistic" or "critical" account of modern war, it needs to acknowledge the costs of war. Since the Vietnam era, this has meant at least a nod toward the problem of PTSD among veterans. It also often translates into a need to depict war injuries as graphically messy rather than neat. Nevertheless, the media industry that creates commercial war films is part of the larger corporate structure which relies on American military hegemony to keep markets open for American business (including cultural products). Therefore, the basic ideological orientation of Hollywood is tacitly geared to supporting foreign wars (Robb; Boggs and Pollard; Der Derian; Stahl). Nevertheless, being perceived as overtly propagandistic would negatively impact box office sales and revenue. Hence, there is a strong incentive to make war films as ambiguous as possible, allowing viewers a wide range of political opinions to find support for their views. This tactic—which we can call, borrowing a phrase from rhetorician Leah Ceccarelli, "strategic ambiguity"—allows multiple viewers to find evidence for their worldview in a text which has been made purposely polysemic (Ceccarelli, "Polysemy" 404). This ambiguity has worked well for the most successful recent films about war, all of which have been either praised for their apolitical stance or praised for wildly divergent reasons. For instance, Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008), the most successful Iraq War film before *American Sniper*, is tightly focused on the individual psychodrama of its adrenalin-addicted bomb disposal specialist and largely avoids any commentary on the legitimacy of the war (Barker 156–69).

American Sniper has also been praised and condemned for widely divergent political tendencies. *New York Post* reviewer Kyle Smith praised it for redeeming militarism itself: "After 40 years of Hollywood counterpropaganda telling us war is necessarily corrupting and malign, ... *American Sniper* nobly presents the case for the other side." *Time Out New* foregrounded the film's dark portrait of war: "Only Clint Eastwood could make a movie about an Iraq War veteran

and infuse it with doubts, mission anxiety and ruination" (Rothkopf). And, as mentioned earlier, one critic actually called it a "devastating antiwar movie" (Denby). Most critics, however, have focused on its realism and aesthetic power, eschewing questions of politics and ideology. Rotten Tomatoes praises its "tense, vivid tribute to its real-life subject" ("American"), and Claudia Puig, writing for *USA Today*, singled out Bradley Cooper's realistic portrayal of Chris Kyle for commendation: "Substantially bulked up and affecting a believable Texas drawl, Cooper embodies Kyle's confidence, intensity and vulnerability." Finally, Kenneth Turin of *The Los Angeles Times* praised the film for its ability to engross the viewer in its realistic combat scenes: "Eastwood's impeccably crafted action sequences so catch us up in the chaos of combat we are almost not aware that we're watching a film at all." In short, it is clear that *American Sniper* successfully sounds a wide spectrum of ideological notes, offering evidence for their very different political takes on the war to a wide range of viewers. In this respect, it goes beyond the normal and inevitable polysemic nature of representation and embodies instead the strategically ambiguous politics required of commercial popular culture.

Nevertheless, this ambiguity and apparent political ambivalence should not be confused with ideological even-handedness or neutrality. The paradoxes of the film do not emerge from a thoughtful attempt to consider the different sides of the question of war as a military strategy and foreign policy, or of the War in Iraq, or even of military service as a personal choice. The film may seem to pull in different directions, but there is nevertheless a dominant vector of emotional and ideological effects choreographed by its narrative *syntax* (closely aligned with what we call narrative arc). This syntax is modeled on the adventure formula, by which a hero travels to a liminal place, discovers his talent for killing, and returns to his home a better and stronger man. The dominant keynotes of this narrative are the pleasure of overcoming challenges, the pleasure of wielding moral violence, and the pleasure of victory (including winning the admiration of other men and the love of the woman).

This adventure-based narrative arc makes Kyle's story attractive and compelling although he is murdered at the end and is depicted as suffering from PTSD for a short while. The well-known fact of Kyle's death at the hands of a disturbed vet could not be omitted, but it is presented as a tragic accident, an unfortunate result of his

selfless devotion to helping other vets. The film conveniently ignores the more complicated aspects of this murder, including Kyle's insistence on taking a man he had quickly identified as unstable to a shooting range and putting a weapon in his hands (Espen). In any case, Kyle's death at the end is presented by the film as unrelated to his success as a warrior. It serves instead as a convenient pretext to promote the authenticity and realism of the film by including real footage of Kyle's funeral procession, suggesting that the film is a realistic biography one step away from documentarian verisimilitude.

Eastwood's portrayal of Kyle as suffering from PTSD also reinforces the seeming realism of the film, as well as making Kyle more palatable as a hero. Ever since the Vietnam War and the acceptance of the label "post-traumatic stress disorder" into the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980, representations of veterans displaying symptoms of psychological distress are obligatory in films wishing to be taken seriously. Although the real Chris Kyle did struggle with psychiatric issues after his discharge, he did not describe these in his autobiography in any detail. Eastwood took it upon himself to add this layer of complexity to the plot, not only partly for reasons of realism, as just described, but also partly to help make Kyle a more likeable and morally acceptable character. Without any hint of PTSD, a sniper who has become a "legend" for killing over one hundred and sixty people, and who professes no doubt or remorse over any of them, could potentially be seen as simply a killer, or worse, as a sociopath. By showing him suffering from mental strain, Eastwood uses the conventions of melodrama to humanize and complicate Kyle.[3]

This depiction of PTSD and other darker sides of war are part of what one could call the *semantics* of the film (i.e., the building blocks of the film and its intended meaning). This includes the gritty scenes of urban warfare, the images of injury and chaos in battle, the scenes of Kyle's wife crying and their family being strained, the scenes of horror in Baghdad and the encounter with the character called the "Butcher," and other explicit acknowledgements of the costs and difficulties of war. These scenes and images all contribute to the apparent realism or "realism-effect" of the film.[4] They also contribute to the sense that war is "hell," a true trial of a man's fortitude and character. To this end, we see other soldiers, including Kyle's brother, buckling under the strain of combat. The fact that Kyle remains stoic

most of the time and eventually recovers only adds to the film's obvious presentation of Kyle as a figure to be admired. Thus, the semantics of the film—accenting the costs of war—ultimately contribute to what I have earlier described as its *syntactical* thrust (i.e., its narrative arc) unfolding in time and structured by the adventure formula, leading to success and maturation of the warrior-hero.

War Adventure: Key Features

Like melodrama or the gothic, war adventure consists of a recognizable family of features which can be found in most iterations of the form. These include: (i) a colonial setting or a symbolic border; (ii) the hero as a wish-fulfillment fantasy, often a larger-than-life figure possessing unusual powers; (iii) a focus on killing; (iv) references to excitement and pleasure; (v) the confrontation with danger and its overcoming leads to a coming of age experience; the hero is often stronger or better at the end than he was at the beginning; (vi) the hero is usually a man and masculinity is typically important in the pleasures and rewards of adventure; and (vii) war adventure aspires to heightened realism despite its formulaic nature; as a result, it often mixes fact and fiction. Some features may be more dominant than others, and some may be missing altogether, but these elements define war adventure and are often present in the adventure mode more generally. These features are more thematic than formal, strictly speaking, because modes can inform a variety of media forms and genres. To differentiate genre and mode it is useful to consider genre as a more specific category, with a more defined historical period and format, than a mode, which is best understood as an underlying structure. However, the term "genre" is used very differently by critics and sometimes so capaciously that it could be used interchangeably with "mode," to avoid repetition. I argue that adventure is the *mode* that informs and shapes the war adventure *genre*, which is a more specific form of adventure.

One of the most universal features of the modern war adventure narrative is its frontier or colonial setting. Almost every kind of adventure involves leaving one's home and travelling to an unknown place, often dangerous, exotic, and either lawless or where laws are more tenuous and frequently challenged. This is a liminal place by

definition and can be literally a border or frontier. In American literature and cinema, a common setting for adventure continues to be some version of the Wild West—the western frontier of the United States as it was pushed toward the Pacific. During the Vietnam War, as many scholars have noted (Hellman), Vietnam was often represented as a frontier, both in the sense of a political border (a demarcating line between the free capitalist West and communist Asia) and a reiteration of the Wild West (for instance, in John Wayne's *The Green Berets*, the American outpost in Vietnam looks exactly like a Western military fort, with a sign saying "Dodge City"—the name of a famous wild frontier town—to make the association explicit).

In *American Sniper*, a similar allusion is made in the first minutes of the film, when one of Kyle's military buddies says, "Welcome to Fallujah, the new Wild West of the old Middle East." The border logic of this analogy is spelled out later in the film by Kyle himself, who justifies the American presence in Iraq by saying, "Would you rather fight them in San Diego?" The unlikely notion that Islamist fighters would attack the United States by sea establishes the notion that Iraq is the front line of defense of the Unites States itself, hence, literally, a national border space.

At stake in setting the adventure on a national or symbolic border is a struggle between civilization and savagery. This is the trope that has justified all of European and American colonial ventures and violence; it is the trope that was invoked every time a Native American population needed to be removed or attacked; and is the trope that now rhetorically fuels the War on Terror as well as the militarization of the national border in the south. Casting the enemy as savage means defining them as less than human and therefore available for annihilation or genocide. This is how the "West was won" and this is how every American war has been waged. The casting of the adversary as subhuman and irredeemably uncivilized—and therefore unassimilable and incapable of negotiation or treaty—is the classic move of the colonial settler (Veracini).

In *American Sniper*, the genocidal logic of the border is on display every time an Iraqi character is on screen. Almost without exception, every local character is represented as irredeemably devious, violent, and cruel, exactly as Native Americans have been portrayed historically. This display of villainy begins with the mother and child duo who open the film by throwing a large grenade at an American

convoy, preceded only by a suspicious-looking man who clearly tips them off by mobile phone. Every Iraqi man who appears in Kyle's sights is doing something explicitly nefarious, such as planting an IUD or running toward Americans with an AK-47. A man whose house Marines commandeer and who offers them hospitality and dinner also turns out to be a sniper with a large arsenal hidden under his floorboards. Another man who becomes an informant will only give them information about a notorious enforcer called The Butcher in exchange for a large sum of money, underlining the cupidity and lack of moral sense in the local population. The Butcher himself is probably the most compelling example of Iraqi savagery, as he sadistically drills his victims to death with a power tool, including a child we are forced to watch being killed. As if this parade of evil-doing were not enough, Eastwood has Kyle and his men discovering an apartment where people are tortured and mutilated, a man is hanging from the ceiling in chains, and body parts and heads are stored in a macabre way on a kitchen shelf.

In short, the film amasses an overwhelming array of evidence to prove that the Iraqi insurgents are cruel, sadistic, amoral, and absolutely evil. When Kyle calls them "savages," as he does throughout the film, he is not harking back to a nineteenth-century colonial nomenclature with a sense of historic irony. He means it perfectly earnestly: to him, Iraqis are evil and savage, and he uses both of these terms without hesitation or qualification. It is no wonder that he never regrets a kill and only wishes he had killed more targets. Kyle's use of the term "savages" is not limited to fighters, however, but encompasses the entire local population. When his friend Biggles tells Kyle he has bought an engagement ring in Baghdad for this fiancée, Kyle is appalled: "Dude, you bought it from savages? How do you know it's not a blood diamond?" Even though Biggles is severely injured shortly after this conversation, he still manages to find the time to buy a new, smaller, but untainted diamond ring, with his fiancée's father's help, in order to avoid giving her the ring purchased in Iraq.[5]

The second key feature of the war adventure narrative is that it is squarely focused on killing. As Cawelti says, the basic moral fantasy of adventure is "triumph over death." The hero will have many close calls, but the main drama of the adventure story is that the hero discovers his "taste or talent" for killing. In the case of *American Sniper*,

Kyle discovers his talent for killing when hunting with his father as a boy. During his SEAL training, he turns out to be a poor shot during target practice but masterfully kills a snake just behind the paper target. "I'm better when it's breathing," Kyle jokingly explains of his uncannily good shooting of live animals and people. His apparent talent for killing is what the film is actually all about: it is a modern hagiography of a sniper with so many verified kills that he is nicknamed "The Legend." Kyle's coyness about the "legend" epithet ("that's a title you don't want, trust me!") and his highly foregrounded professionalism ("just doing my job") are included in the film to make its basic theme and protagonist more acceptable, but the story is nevertheless an homage to a remorseless killer.

The third feature is about the emotions that adventure produces in characters and viewers alike. The main affective registers evoked by the adventure tale include excitement, intense adrenalin-fueled emotion, and just sheer pleasure. Adventure is about victory, overcoming obstacles, discovering new places, and conquering enemies—both natural and human. This type of pleasure can be relatively innocent, such as the thrill of achieving something extraordinary through sport or exploration or saving someone from danger, but in the case of war adventure it always centers on a pleasure in violence. The violence is carefully framed as moral violence so that there is no need to feel guilty about the pleasure. In the case of *American Sniper*, every person—without exception—that Kyle kills is explicitly shown to be doing something criminal and potentially deadly for American soldiers, including the mother and child mentioned earlier, whose deaths are set up at the beginning of the film as a potential ethical problem for the viewer. Before we know anything about him, Kyle trains his sights on a woman and child and must decide whether to shoot. The pressure is high, as he is told "it's your call," and his spotter reminds him that he will be sent to military prison if he's wrong about the child, although he has clearly identified him being given a "RKG Russian grenade" to throw. The film cuts at this point to Kyle himself as a child, shooting his first deer with his father's approval ("That was a hell of a shot, son. You got a gift") and then follows his childhood, youth, and courtship of his wife until picking up the scene again twenty-seven minutes into the film, by which time we are supposed to have been persuaded of Kyle's good character. Now we see the child running toward the convoy to throw the grenade,

followed by his mother who picks it up and throws it after Kyle shoots him. If the first iteration of the scene was supposed to represent an ethical dilemma, the second viewing acts as a solution: the moral lines have been starkly drawn to reveal an irreproachably good American (a patriot who enlists in response to the 9/11 attacks) and a homicidal mother–child terrorist team.

Nevertheless, even if the moral right belongs to Kyle, the film is reticent to show him actually enjoying the kill. That would blur the lines between the sadistic enemy and the morally righteous hero. Even though Kyle cannot express pleasure personally, and must instead appear very serious and professional throughout his sniping scenes (as he does on the main poster for the film), his spotter is allowed to express the visceral pleasure he cannot show. "Evil fucking bitch!" says the spotter as he grins after Kyle pulls the trigger, reassuring the audience that Kyle was right to kill her, as well as expressing the pleasure that always accompanies the deployment of righteous violence against an enemy that deserves to die. Kyle is nevertheless shown enjoying the pleasure of military service in other ways: by having fun with his team members, by having flirtatious phone calls with his wife while waiting for a target, and by being applauded by his fellow soldiers in the base cafeteria for his exemplary performance.

Besides being depicted as pleasurable, violence in the war adventure mode is ultimately transformative and regenerative for the hero. If the protagonist is somehow stronger, more mature, more "manly" at the end of the story, then the story is probably an adventure. Just as Joseph Campbell's monomyth describes a hero who travels to a "special world" and undergoes an ordeal, returning with a boon, one of the most common forms of the war adventure narrative is that of rite of passage or transition from boyhood to manhood. Although Kyle is not a boy when he leaves for Iraq, he is still a young man, just married, whom we have watched live an immature life of rodeo, parties, and military training. He is clearly a youth when he leaves for war and a man when he returns. Although he struggles with a period of PTSD during his service and especially after his last tour, the film shows him quickly recovering once he starts helping other veterans. At the end of the film, then, Kyle is not only recovered but far more mature and steady than he was before he left. There is a quick succession of scenes at the end meant to show how he has been

transformed into an excellent father: a scene of him teaching his son to hunt, in an exact reiteration of the earlier scene with his own father, another scene of him watching horses with his daughter, and finally a scene of him playing around with his kids at home. Another set of scenes at the end emphasizes his virility and tries to prove his full recovery as a husband: one in which he pulls his wife into the shower with him and another in which he points a gun at her in a playful version of a coercion fantasy. In case we still need more proof of his improved condition, his wife is given a speech in which she tells him how proud she is of him and how far he has come.

Finally, after he drives off with the man who is going to kill him, selflessly devoting an afternoon to a needy vet, proving that he has become a more generous and civic minded man than he was before he went to Iraq, the film cuts to a final sequence of real footage from his funeral motorcade, showing streets lined with crowds of people, the ultimate evidence of his transformation into a public hero. Despite the film's lip service to the fact of posttraumatic stress disorder, the narrative arc shows the hero transformed into an enviable man at the end, a formidable warrior, a playful father, an adored husband, a selfless friend and volunteer at the local hospital. It is certainly not hard to imagine viewers leaving the film with a wish to become like him. Combat is portrayed as a challenging ordeal, but, as in the classical adventure paradigm, an effective means to test one's mettle and to become a man.

To draw out the implications of the previous point more explicitly, war adventure is traditionally a masculinist mode, almost always featuring a male hero, positively portraying the male bonds forged in training and battle as the strongest and most important in a man's life, and, in its modern variant (since *Robinson Crusoe*), heavily invested in white male masculinity in particular.[6] According to Michael Kimmel, masculinity is not an interior trait but an identity that can only be conferred by other men (5). No activity elicits as much admiration and male approval as the successful deployment of violence, both by hierarchical superiors within the military (approval by symbolic father figures is literally built into the military system, as every promotion of rank involves approval from commanding officers), and by fellow soldiers. Chris Kyle is shown throughout the film to enjoy the esteem and confidence of his military superiors, as well as the naked admiration and applause of fellow SEALs and Marines.

The most illustrative scene for this, mentioned earlier, features a soldier who approaches Chris Kyle in a garage shop when he is home between tours to tell Kyle's son that his father had saved him in Fallujah and that he is a hero. The soldier even solemnly salutes him. Although the jittery Kyle seems nonplussed by this incident, he later takes great pleasure in helping disabled veterans he meets at the VA hospital and clearly enjoys their grateful admiration. In a revealing scene, he takes two injured vets shooting, and it is clear that all of them are transformed by the experience. The injured vet says, after hitting the target, that he feels like he's "got his balls back," and Kyle is shown in the immediately following scenes, described earlier, as fully healed from his PTSD. In the context of the adventure mode, even practicing for violence by shooting guns at targets is a powerful catalyst for both masculine identity and psychic healing.

The last key feature of war adventure is its tendency to mix fact and fiction. War adventure aspires to be taken as authentic and true and goes to great lengths to present itself as grounded in historical or biographical fact. According to war film scholars, this happens to also be a trend in recent war cinema, at least since the beginning of the Iraq War (Bjerre; Chare; Gates). In the case of *American Sniper*, the fact that it is about a real person and based on his autobiography automatically lends the film credibility. Eastwood amplifies this further by including archival footage from Kyle's funeral procession, as well as several news reports of terrorist attacks on American targets throughout the film. The combat sequences are also shot in the "immediate, chaotic, and claustrophobic" style that Philippa Gates has identified as typical of the most recent cycle of war films and their dual tendency toward representational realism and extremely conservative, moralizing, and glorifying narratives (298). In short, *American Sniper* fits perfectly in the recent pattern of ultrarealistic and seemingly apolitical combat films and even corresponds to the trend of focusing in a seemingly nonjudgmental way on soldiers as "war junkies" that Bjerre has discussed in an article in *The Journal of War and Culture Studies* (224). Nevertheless, this mixing of fact and fiction and seeming hyperrealism is not a new development in war narrative but a key feature of the adventure genre that dates back into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and *Captain Singleton.* Comparable adventure stories from the nineteenth century include Melville's *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*, with

its depiction of the real war hero John Paul Jones (1855), and Kirk Munroe's *Forward March: A Tale of the Spanish-American War* (1899), which has the fictional protagonist interacting with Theodore Roosevelt and other historical figures of the time.

Placing the contemporary Hollywood trend of combat realism in the context of the history of the adventure mode makes it clear that this development is not really new at all. Instead, it is a return on the part of war storytelling to the conventions of the adventure genre and a departure from the more skeptical, ironic, and horror-dominated narratives of the post-Vietnam era. In short, the film *American Sniper*, although marketed as a true story and a critical look at the costs of war, is clearly a twenty-first-century iteration of the modern war adventure narrative, whose cultural work has traditionally been and continues to be the legitimation and re-enchantment of empire and the violence needed to sustain it. Only by understanding the seductive power of the adventure mode, as it harnesses both pleasure and manhood in the service of righteous violence, can we hope to break the spell and step back from the endless cycle of violence and death that Hollywood war films help to normalize and commodify.

Notes

1. In her study of violence in high modernist texts, *At the Violet Hour*, Sarah Cole revives the terms "enchantment" and "disenchantment," demonstrating the long literary tradition of each of these categories (39–43). Cole calls these respective "theories of violence," each serving as a locus for a "potent political imaginary, including feminist and antimilitarism stances" for disenchantment and "nationalist ideals and a language of elevated militarism" for the rhetoric of enchantment (39–40). Each also "helped to structure the literary output of the modernist years" in Cole's account, and I would argue that they help structure the representation of war violence more generally (39). Cole's descriptions of each term are particularly forceful and concise. "To enchant," she proposes, "is to imbue the violent experience with symbolic and cultural potency" (43). To disenchant, she continues, "is to refuse that structure, to insist on the bare, forked existence of the violated being, bereft of symbol" (43).
2. See Faludi for a discussion of postwar masculinity in distress and Jeffords for how this played out in Hollywood films more generally.
3. It bears remembering that snipers have often been regarded with a high degree of ambivalence, to say the least. Shooting unsuspecting targets from a hidden position, snipers can easily be regarded as less honorable warriors than men who risk their lives and face their enemy in battle (Browne). Only in the current context of technological war and drone assassinations could a sniper like Kyle have been made into a hero.
4. In this context, realism refers both to the representational strategies that give the film a lifelike appearance, clearly aligning it with the world as we know it as opposed to fantasy or

obvious fiction, and also to the fact that the film is marketed as potentially real, or true to historical fact, based on Kyle's biography. For a more detailed discussion of the difference between realism and the real, see Höglund and Galloway. It bears pointing out that my use of the semantics/syntax distinction is not dissimilar from Altman's argument that genre films can be approached although attention to their "common traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations, sets" (which he calls "semantics"), and the "structures into which [these building blocks] are arranged" (10). Similarly, I refer to the look and feel and aesthetics of the film as "semantics" and the temporal unfolding of meaning by the narrative as its "syntax."

5. This subplot about the ring also succinctly recalls the imperial history of the war adventure genre, which has traditionally taken precious jewels as a theme, reflecting the extractive and mining interests of modern colonialism, where plundering colonial territories and the Wild West frontier for precious metals, gold, silver, and precious stones was at the heart of the colonial enterprise (Green, *Dreams* 11–12).

6. In recent years, there have been female adventure heroes: Lara Croft, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Selene from the *Underworld* franchise, and Raven/Mystique from the *X-Men* films, for example, and many of these represent interesting rewritings of the male adventure formula. Nevertheless, the world in which they operate often continues to be thoroughly structured by conventional racial, gender, and national/ethnic categories. The only exceptions are franchises that explicitly and consciously seek to complicate these assumptions, such as the *X-Men* series.

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