

AMERICAN PASTORAL

American Sniper

TWO SCENES, one at the beginning of the film and one near the end, create a chilling formal rhyme that underlines the larger patterns of violence threaded through *American Sniper* (2014). In the opening sequence, Petty Officer Chris Kyle (played by Bradley Cooper), the sniper of the film's title, is seen at the start of his first assignment in Iraq, watching over a city road as a convoy of marines is about to drive through. A burqa-clad woman and a young boy walk slowly out of a doorway. Kyle is on alert—there is something about her way of walking that seems odd. As he watches them through his sniper's scope, the woman reaches inside her robe and takes out a large grenade. She hands it to the boy, who begins running toward the convoy in order to get close enough to fling the weapon. As he lifts the grenade for the throw, the film cuts away from the action to a series of flashback scenes of Kyle's boyhood—his first hunting experience; his violent rescue of his brother, who is being beaten by a bully; the lesson his father imparts at the dinner table concerning the wolves, the sheep, and the sheepdog who protects the sheep. We then return to the scene in Iraq, as Kyle pulls the trigger. As we watch through the scope, the young boy collapses, a bullet wound in the middle of his chest. The woman, perhaps his mother, then rushes to him, picks up the grenade, and tries to hurl it at the convoy herself. Kyle shoots her as well, causing the grenade to fall short. His first two shots as a sniper in Iraq have thus been directed at a young boy and his mother—actions that may have saved ten marines, he is told, but that clearly exact a psychic toll.



Chris Kyle, in his suburban home, at the end of the film. *American Sniper*, directed by Clint Eastwood, 2014. Produced by Clint Eastwood, Robert Lorenz, Andrew Lazar, Bradley Cooper, and Peter Morgan.

Fast-forward to the last sequence of the film. The setting is Kyle's suburban home, a sunlit interior in the middle of the day. The scene begins with the camera focusing in close-up on a large revolver, pointed into the living room, as Kyle walks silently through the house. Framed at waist height, we also see the rodeo belt he had won in a contest earlier in the film. The camera takes in Kyle's young daughter, who smiles and giggles at him, and then his young son, also smiling and playing a video game. Kyle finds his wife in the kitchen, stops in the doorway, cocks the revolver, and speaks. She turns to him, laughing.

The nightmare quality of this scene, in which a pistol cocked and seemingly aimed at a loving family seems to be a "normal" form of behavior, eliciting smiles and laughter rather than terror, captures the complex and devastating critique of violence in American culture that Clint Eastwood sets forth in this film. The violence of war haunts the American dreamscape, the film suggests, as it draws a series of parallels between the war in Iraq and the culture of violence that has penetrated U.S. domestic life. Framing a story of psychological damage, PTSD, and moral injury through the prism of the autobiography of Chris Kyle, who was given the nickname "Legend" for his prowess as a sniper, the film explores the dark paradox of war, in which Kyle's courage and commitment as a soldier—he signed on for four tours of duty in Iraq—leads directly to increasing instability and brooding obsession at home, an instability that devolves into auditory hallucinations, paranoia, and rage. In *American Sniper*, the

concept of productive pathology, which I discussed above, finds its clarified expression, as the character displays both consummate skill on the battlefield, an implacable singleness of purpose, and a kind of frozen withdrawal from the world when he is home between tours. As Jonna Eagle has written, Kyle is portrayed both as lethal agent and as suffering victim, “psychically burdened by the very weapons that render him deadly.”¹

These two distant places, the battlefield in Iraq and the U.S. homeland, as the film makes clear, are not separate or distinct. Formally, the work is dominated by crosscutting, suturing scenes of combat in Iraq and ordinary life in the United States. Twice, Kyle and his wife, Taya (Sienna Miller), are speaking on the phone when a firefight breaks out, the sounds of shots and battlefield mayhem erupting through the ether as Taya tries to talk with Chris. The terror—and sometimes outright horror—of Kyle’s experiences in Iraq redefine the most intimate moments of their lives together, the moments revolving around Taya’s pregnancies and the birth of their two children. The interpenetration of one realm by another in the moment-to-moment unfolding of the story, the gluing together of the ordinary scenes and spaces of American life and the violent aggression of war, touches on an area of war representation that has seldom been explored in American film and has a particular salience in the present day.

In this chapter, I explore a theme that I have considered, in outline form, throughout this book—the diffusion of the emotions, gestures, and mentality of war into daily American life—a theme that is made explicit in *American Sniper*. The violence that permeates the film is rendered boldly in the scenes set in Iraq, in which brutality, atrocity, and death are given full audition. The feral violence of war, however, is portrayed as also living just beneath the surface of the U.S. suburban world, a pastoral realm of dogs, children, and barbecues. In the film’s depiction of the character of Chris Kyle, the shadow world that the returning combat soldier inhabits comes into full view, a subjective reality defined by threat and guilt.

In its complex engagement with PTSD and moral injury, its dramatization of the warping of personality and perception caused by war, *American Sniper* succeeds in embedding a pointed social and historical critique of the culture of war within an empathetic treatment

of the soldiers who serve. The film underlines their commitment and purpose while exposing war's destructive effects on the soldiers themselves, their families, and importantly, the Iraqi families the U.S. soldiers encounter.²

The plot of the film is recursive, introducing Kyle's early life story in the suspended moments between training his scope on the young Iraqi boy with the grenade and pulling the trigger. At several points, the film returns to a kind of repetition and variation of the pattern set out in the opening. In the first set of subjective flashbacks, for example, in the split seconds before he pulls the trigger, Kyle is seen being anointed by his father after he successfully shoots his first deer—he has “a gift” for marksmanship, his father says, and a responsibility to protect those less strong. As if the successive repetition of a rule or a routine were his only mode for confronting the present, the character follows this principle almost programmatically.

Later, the film sketches his young adulthood in a series of vignettes, depicting him riding broncos, winning rodeo competitions, and highlighting his affection for his younger brother. In these short scenes, the film paints the character and his life in the narrative style that Gerard Genette calls the frequentative mode: events that are portrayed once stand in for a series of typical events, in this case, a regular order of experiences consisting of rodeos, beer, and rowdy nights.³ Then 9/11 occurs.

Kyle quickly enlists in the Navy SEALs and endures a harrowing training regimen. His skill as a sharpshooter is soon recognized. Before he deploys to Iraq, however, he embarks on a fast-paced romance with a young woman he meets at a bar near the base, Taya, every bit his match for wit and physical attractiveness. From this point forward, in several key scenes, the focal perspective is split between the two characters.

In Iraq, Kyle's superior skill as a sniper is demonstrated in a montage of quickly executed kills. His fame in the U.S. military and among the insurgents travels fast and far: the insurgents soon issue a wanted poster for him, promising a lavish reward for his death. Despite the danger, he is not content to sit in relative safety on a rooftop to look out for threats; he insists on joining the marines in their door-to-door searches. In these street-level encounters, Kyle finds himself breaking into family homes, intimidating children, women,

and older men, and essentially violating the domestic worlds of families who are not unlike the one he and Taya hope to establish in the States. Moreover, in what increasingly develops into a mirror-world doubling, Kyle is shadowed by an enemy sniper, a man the soldiers have named Mustafa, who seems to be present at every skirmish Kyle is involved in. In one scene, Kyle is pinned down by this dop-pelgänger and barely manages to escape.

On his various returns to the States between tours, he is plagued with demons. He will not leave his house and barely communicates with his wife, who is trying to keep their marriage together and raise a family. The traumatic effects of combat, which he assigns to his grief over the men he could not protect, are clearly etched on his features and in his figure behavior. He rails against the indifference of the public to the war, angered that people can go about their ordinary lives while soldiers are dying in Iraq and Afghanistan. At home between tours, he wears the same stained baseball cap as when he is on duty in Iraq, where he turns the brim backward before he sets up in his sniper's position. At one point, after he returns from his fourth deployment, he is portrayed staring at a TV screen that has been turned off, as the sounds of war are heard on the soundtrack.

In the final act of the film, Kyle experiences a frightening breakdown, after which he finally agrees to talk to a VA therapist. The therapist suggests that if he still wants to help his fellow soldiers, he might speak with those who are in the hospital for treatment. From this point in the narrative, Kyle is moving toward emotional and mental health: his involvement with other veterans suffering from devastating physical and mental injuries proves to be powerfully therapeutic. A series of short, affectionate scenes with his daughter, his son, and his wife steer the film toward its conclusion. A happy resolution is in view. Taya tells Chris how proud she is of him and compliments him on what a great father and husband he has become. Then she sees a hollow-eyed man in their driveway, waiting for Chris by his truck—a troubled former soldier whom Kyle has arranged to take to the shooting range. In the last shot of the narrative, she watches out the door as they drive off together. A brief title then comes on the screen, stating that Chris Kyle was killed that day by a fellow soldier he was trying to help.

THE CHILD IN WAR

Images of children under threat appear throughout *American Sniper*, recurring in several scenes set in Iraq and in the States, and stamping each of the film's main acts. As I have argued elsewhere in this book, the child as victim and target of war forms a central motif in the films I consider, one that summons complex emotions of sympathy, fear, and guilt in the protagonists while also shifting to Western characters the pathos associated with the vulnerable or wounded innocent. Examples can be found in scenes in *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Eye in the Sky* (2015), *Restrepo* (2010), in the form of wounded tribal children, and *A Private War* (2018), with the dying Palestinian girl and the Syrian child whose last moments are broadcast on CNN. In each of these works, the image of the child victim lingers, haunting the main characters. Moreover, in each of these films, the pathos conventionally associated with the child in war, the emotions that would ordinarily attach to the child victim, are transferred instead to the Western protagonist, whose guilt and suffering is rendered at length. A curious psychological double identity occurs in these scenes, in which the protagonists serving as the agents of war, or those reporting on war, wear the face of the victims of war.

The repeated images of the vulnerable child in *American Sniper*, however, are distinct from what we have seen in other films. At the beginning of the work, for example, Kyle's younger brother is shown being beaten by a schoolyard bully; Kyle rescues his brother with force, violently overpowering the much larger boy. Later, just after his daughter is born, Kyle visits the hospital neonatal clinic and sees that his newly born child is crying; the nurse is tending to another infant. Kyle can scarcely contain himself as he pounds on the thick glass wall trying to get the nurse's attention. And toward the end of the film, at a backyard barbecue, Kyle's son is shown playing keep-away with the family dog. When the dog gets the boy on the ground, playfully tugging at his hoodie, Kyle responds with frightening rage.

In the combat scenes set in Iraq, however, the image of the child in war takes on more sinister characteristics. At two different points in the film, Kyle is confronted with a child wielding a weapon. In the first instance, as briefly discussed above, Kyle peers through his scope as the young Iraqi boy with a grenade is about to hurl it at a

convoy of American soldiers. The sniper pauses to make certain the boy is going to throw the grenade, and then shoots him. His careful observation reads as deliberateness, calculation, and finally reluctant acceptance of what he must do. The second time he confronts a child with a weapon, late into his third deployment, the scene carries a different charge. Kyle has just dispatched an Iraqi gunman wielding a large grenade launcher. The heavy piece falls to the ground. A young boy approaches and tries to pick up the unwieldy weapon. As Kyle watches the boy struggle with the heavy ordnance, his finger on the trigger, he is consumed by dread, whispering to himself, "Don't pick up the weapon, don't pick it up!" The long, agonizing scene plays out as an ordeal, an emotional rack and screw, as Kyle is clearly at a breaking point. When the boy abandons the weapon and takes off running, Kyle cries with relief.

In these scenes, which function as dramatic crescendos, Kyle's image of himself, the compass of his world and his position in it, is first threatened and then breaks down. The orderly, pastoral universe mapped by his father—where the sheep, the wolves, and the sheep-dog exist in a kind of fixed and balanced equilibrium—is thrown into disarray in the very first scene, where Kyle, confronted with the necessity of killing a child and his mother, must assume the role of the wolf, as well as that of protector of the troops. Depicting combat as a carousel of vulnerable, victimized, and predatory figures, with each type continually circling into view, the film propels Kyle into a series of tense scenes where the roles and positions unexpectedly change. Even the children are revealed to be dangerous. Reminiscent in some ways of Sigmund Freud's well-known deconstruction of the fantasy "A Child Is Being Beaten," the identities of the agents of violence and the victims of violence are not constant; the roles change as the combat situations unfold.⁴

The imagery of the child victim, and the twisting and shifting of symbolic roles that it generates, reaches its apotheosis in a scene near the middle of the film. A sadist nicknamed "the Butcher," a villain of outsized proportions, serves in the film as an enforcer for the insurgent leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The Butcher, a fictional creation, has a reputation for severing body parts from his victims and saving them; he is also known for using an electric drill as a torture and execution device. During his initial deployment, Kyle leads a

team that is charged with finding and dispatching al-Zarqawi, who is hiding somewhere in the city. After breaking into a neighborhood house, Kyle aggressively confronts the father of a family, as his wife and children cower in the background. Roughly insisting that the man talk to him, Kyle extracts information about the Butcher, including his actual name. Soon after, the team of marines returns to the neighborhood, planning to pay the man for his good information. En route in a Humvee, Kyle takes a call from Taya, who has phoned to tell him that she has just found out that the child they are expecting is a boy.

Directly after Taya relays this information to Kyle, we see the expert sniper, Mustafa, take aim and shoot the driver of the Humvee. The vehicle crashes and the insurgent sniper begins picking off soldiers. As Taya listens to the battle through the cell phone, Kyle is forced to take cover, leaving his phone behind. The film cuts rapidly among Taya, standing at the entrance to the hospital; Mustafa, in cool control of the battle zone at his sniper's post; and Kyle, keeping low, barely evading Mustafa's shots. The Butcher then appears, dragging the young son of the Iraqi informant outside into the square. As the mother and father plead with him, the Butcher applies the drill to the boy's head and then kills the father, saying that if the villagers talk to the soldiers they will die with the soldiers.

The adrenalized emotion of the scene is ramped up by the near stasis of the figures. The editing ricochets from the horrifying Grand Guignol unfolding in the square; to the impassive face of Mustafa, sighting his targets; to the scrabbling impotence of Kyle as he tries to lift his head to get a shot; to the anguished face of Taya, listening on the phone. The melodramatic terror of the young boy's execution is projected directly into the heart of the U.S. homeland. It is as if we see the scene through the imaginative perspective of Taya. Once more, as in the case of several other films I have discussed, the pathos and tragedy of the young boy and his family, the Iraqi victims of the attack, is transferred to the Western characters, in this case, to Taya, who serves as the scene's focalizer.

What has also occurred, however, is another rotation of roles. Kyle's insistence on breaking into the neighborhood home, his determination to extract information from the father of the family, exposes the man, leading directly to the torture and death of his son,

followed by his own death. At the exact point in the narrative when Kyle is presented with the news of his own son, soon to be born, he witnesses the death of the son of the Iraqi informant—a killing that is, at some level, his fault.

In a scene filled with melodramatic intensity, the film embeds a series of mirror structures: a son who is killed and a son who is about to be born, a father who dies and a father to be. And in the character of Taya, the mirroring is made explicit: like the Iraqi mother in the scene, she is frantic, nearly doubled over, suffused with grief and worry. The heightened dramatic tension of the sequence, its Goya-like horror, to some degree conceals its most salient point—that the violence of war spreads far beyond the battlefield, to the intimate lives of everyone involved, especially the noncombatants.

“IT WAS THAT LETTER THAT KILLED MARC”

As the film progresses, Kyle establishes a close friendship with two members of the SEAL team, Biggles (Jake McDorman) and Marc (Luke Grimes), the team leader. The two men present contrasting character types familiar from numerous war films, including *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006). Biggles performs as the jokester, jesting with Kyle about his prowess as a sniper, nicknaming him “Legend” and providing an easygoing comradeship. Marc, for his part, serves as wry philosopher. A former seminarian, he is cool, reflective, and somewhat detached from the rest of the team’s exuberant style. Both of Kyle’s friends are killed in battle.

Narratives of war are distinguished by the remarkable stability of their conventions, which have remained in place, more or less unchanged, from the time of the *Iliad*. Despite vast historical, technological, and aesthetic shifts over the course of more than two millennia, the core narrative events and scenes of the war narrative have largely remained consistent. One of the most symbolically potent conventions of war cinema is the scene of mourning for a fallen comrade. The representation of battlefield death and its aftermath, in scenes of mourning and burial, often provides a revelatory moment, a nodal point, in which the emotional vectors of the war story intersect with codes of cultural performance and historical memory. The wider significance of war for the culture and the period is often

crystallized in these scenes. In the contemporary war film, however, such scenes are often nothing but a remnant. In *The Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), and *Restrepo*, for example, rituals of mourning are notably muted, if they are depicted at all. Rather, the death of a major character in these works is registered quietly, as a diffuse melancholy that settles over the film. The absent mourning and burial scenes of these works may be a distant echo of the films of World War I, where no one remained to tell the story or cared to remember.⁵

American Sniper, in contrast to the majority of Iraq and Afghanistan war films, gives full weight to the convention of the mourning and burial scene. Evoking genre memory, the film appears, at least at first glance, to revert to an older code of military and social ritual. Two such scenes are enacted in the film—the funeral and burial of SEAL team leader Marc, killed in an ambush in Iraq, and the funeral of the biographical Chris Kyle—the latter consisting of documentary footage added to the film after Kyle was killed in the United States by a fellow veteran suffering from PTSD. (I address the second funeral and mourning scene, which concludes the film, at the end of the chapter.)

The first burial scene follows directly from the fatal ambush in Iraq. Soon after Marc is shot, the film cuts to the interior of a military plane transporting five flag-draped caskets back to the States. Kyle and a couple of other men accompany the remains. As the men sit silently on the plane, the sound of a woman's trembling voice is asynchronously superimposed over the scene. She enunciates the words in a slow, formal rhythm: "Glory is something some men chase and others find themselves stumbling upon, not expecting to find it." The film then cuts to Marc's burial ceremony, with Kyle and Taya in attendance, as the speaking woman, evidently Marc's mother, continues her recitation, now on camera, reading a letter from her son. "My question is when does glory fade away and become a wrongful crusade?" A cut to Kyle and Taya occurs here. "Or an unjustified means which consumes one completely. I've seen war and I've seen death." On the word "death," a navy honor guard begins their salute, presenting arms, taking aim, and firing three rounds into the air. At the sound of the shots, Taya flinches; Marc's mother sobs and shakes her head slightly, as if rejecting the salute. The film then cuts to the bugler playing "Taps," to the folding of the flag, to the presentation of

the flag to a younger woman, perhaps Marc's wife. In close-up, Taya slowly lifts her gaze to Kyle's impassive face. He marks his farewell by pounding his SEAL insignia into the coffin, where it joins the insignias of other team members.

The discordant notes of dissent within a solemn ritual meant to mold consensus around the value of sacrifice for nation has been reinforced by the scene's visual accents, in particular the close-ups of Taya and Marc's mother. Moreover, the themes of the traditional commemoration for the fallen soldier are undercut by the written words of the man being honored, even as the ritualized gestures, the choreographed movements, and the sounding of "Taps" are played out. On the ride home, Taya insists on hearing from Chris what he thought of the letter Marc had sent to his mother two weeks before. Chris responds, "It wasn't the ambush, it was that letter killed Marc. He let go, and he paid the price for it." Kyle's response is punctuated by his wary glances into the rearview mirror, where he sees a van that seems to be following too closely, as daily life now harbors visible and invisible threats. The intrusion of doubt and ambivalence into the fraternal world of the SEALs, instantiated here by Marc's letter, constitutes one such threat; Taya's skepticism represents another. Far from serving as a symbolic enactment of loss and collective renewal, the burial scene has here become a confession of doubt and a form of penance, in which the words "wrongful crusade" and "unjustified means" mark a very different perspective on war than that taken by Kyle.

MUSTAFA

Following Marc's funeral, Kyle returns to Iraq for his fourth deployment, motivated, it seems, not by patriotic commitment but by a sense of unfinished business—the insurgent sniper Mustafa. The character is presented in the film as a dark double to Kyle; dressed in black, with a black kerchief tied behind his head, he is depicted in several scenes preparing for his assignments, moving into a secure position from which to shoot, taking aim, and dispatching American soldiers with ease. Unlike Kyle, however, he is not seen in the company of other fighters; his spotters in the city alert him via cell phone to the movements and locations of American troops. In one scene, Mustafa is pictured "at home," in rooms he shares with a

young woman, presumably his wife, and an infant. As Mustafa spins a large bullet on the table in front of him, we view a reward poster with Chris Kyle's image on it. When the bullet stops spinning, it is pointed directly at Mustafa.

The throwback formula of two gunslingers destined to face off on a dusty street has a long history in the Western genre, of course, including Eastwood's own films, and a short history in war cinema as well. The most immediate reference point may be Jean-Jacques Annaud's *Enemy at the Gates* (2001), which is dominated by a fictional duel between a German and a Russian sniper during the siege of Leningrad during World War II. Similarly, in *American Sniper*, Mustafa is present during each of Kyle's four deployments and develops a legendary reputation in his own right. As a marksman, he is portrayed as an equal to Chris Kyle—an Olympic gold medalist who competed for Syria, as we discover from a photo on the wall of his dwelling. He is also portrayed as a father and a husband, further linking him with Kyle. In the asymmetrical warfare of Iraq, the contest of Mustafa and Kyle creates a kind of symmetry, where the abilities of the two gunmen are evenly matched and their domestic lives, the film suggests, comparable.

During Kyle's fourth deployment, he has an opportunity to take a shot at Mustafa, although the distance of 2,100 yards would seem to make contact impossible. Moreover, a sandstorm is blowing in. The commanding officer, fearing the gunshot will alert the insurgents to the Americans' presence, insists that Kyle not risk it; several times, the officer in command tells Kyle not to shoot, that to do so will put the entire team in danger. Kyle ignores him, sets himself, and fires a bullet that the camera follows in slow motion to its target.

A dramatic array of shot sizes and camera movements set this scene apart, including drone images from on high, footage from a racing U.S. helicopter, and extreme, static close-ups. The centerpiece of the scene, the kernel around which the sequence builds, however, is the extraordinary exchange of matching close-ups pairing Kyle and Mustafa, each of whom is shown sighting their targets, an exchange rendered in dramatic portraiture shots that build in size and intensity as the action unfolds. The rhyming movements and parallel actions of the two shooters, as each sniper composes himself, releases the safety, and pulls the trigger, and the matching views



Chris Kyle, lining up a shot. *American Sniper*, directed by Clint Eastwood, 2014. Produced by Clint Eastwood, Robert Lorenz, Andrew Lazar, Bradley Cooper, and Peter Morgan.



Mustafa, the Syrian sniper, Chris Kyle's dark doppelgänger. *American Sniper*, directed by Clint Eastwood, 2014. Produced by Clint Eastwood, Robert Lorenz, Andrew Lazar, Bradley Cooper, and Peter Morgan.

through both snipers' scopes, as first Mustafa hits his target—a U.S. soldier—and then, a few minutes later, as Kyle hits his, suggest that the two characters can be seen as two halves of the same figure.

In the Vietnam War movie *The Deer Hunter* (1978), the “one shot” exalted by the film's characters as the acme of righteous violence—tragically enacted in its concluding scene of Russian roulette—is both a manifestation of an ideal and an ironic marker, a karmic summary, of war's losses. It is a clear reference point for *American Sniper*. The suicide that darkens the ending of the earlier film is not far from view in the film's portrayal of Chris Kyle, even in the scene that most emphatically demonstrates his prowess. Although he rightly maintains that Mustafa “had eyes on our guys,” his one shot reveals the

U.S. soldiers' position and, as the officer had warned, insurgents quickly swarm them. As the sandstorm begins to build, a protracted firefight breaks out. Overwhelmed by insurgents, with his team running out of ammunition, unable to be quickly extracted from the area, the team leader calls for a missile strike on their own position, saying he doesn't want to be "dragged through the street." As the helicopter armed with the missile approaches, Kyle calls Taya on his cell phone and tells her, as he breaks down, that he is "ready to come home." As in the previous scene, Taya is crosscut into the middle of the firefight, as she listens to Kyle over the furor of the battle. As we watch the missile's trajectory from the perspective of the pilot, the wind of the sandstorm causes the shot to miss. The exfiltration team finally arrives, and with the blowing sand almost completely blotting out the camera's view the unit is rescued.

The scene of Kyle's "impossible shot" has been criticized for its triumphal assertion of dominance and its atavistic elevation of individual combat. Roger Stahl, for example, understands the moment as a crystallized expression of what he calls the "weaponized gaze" that has, in his view, dominated American culture for the past thirty years. The sequence and the film overall, he argues, consistently fuses the spectator's gaze with the viewfinder of the weapon, be it the drone or the sniper scope. The optical collaboration that results reinforces identification with the character of Chris Kyle, thus positioning the spectator as complicit with a generalized assent to the war. Enlarging this point, Stahl argues that the American spectator, over the past thirty years—since the Gulf War—has in effect become a participant in the military apparatus, secured through an optical identification that is continuously renewed in media coverage, films, and video games. Seduced into an alignment with the military gaze, the American spectator is lured into an uncritical acceptance of what Stahl sees as the dominant narrative of American history, centered on imperialism and aggression.

In the impossible-shot sequence of *American Sniper*, this identification, for Stahl, attains its most direct expression. Kyle's relentless, impossibly accurate marksmanship becomes a symbolic resolution, rehabilitating a nation wounded to its core by the terror attacks of 9/11: "Seized by a mystical moment of intuition rivalling only David's impossible hit on Goliath, Kyle pulls the trigger and successfully

takes Mustafa out. . . . We zoom in on Mustafa, marking his eye for annihilation, even as he peers through his own scope."⁶

Stahl's reading of the film, which is highly critical, emphasizes the point-of-view shots in the film, especially those through the sniper's scope, which he takes as a synecdoche for the whole battery of optical weaponry that has been such a prominent aspect of actual war since the invention of photography, a critical position first set out by Paul Virilio.⁷ Where I disagree with Stahl's analysis of the film is in his blanket understanding of the work as a celebration of U.S. state violence through its principal warrior avatar, Chris Kyle. This work's complex mode of address, in which violence as the default setting in American history and culture is held up to scrutiny and critique but rendered in a form that gives credence to the patriotism and bravery of soldiers at war, is not considered in Stahl's analysis.

Chris Kyle's shooting of Mustafa, an act he commits despite a direct order to stand down, forces the commanding officer to call in a suicide strike on the U.S. position, an action that will certainly kill the entire company in addition to the insurgents attacking the building. Although the slow-motion transit of the bullet from Kyle's rifle has been taken as the signature shot of the film, the much larger bullet—the missile fired from the U.S. helicopter, aimed at the company of U.S. soldiers—might be considered its symbolic counterpart. The mirror construction that dominates the film here returns with a vengeance, as the U.S. military has turned its guns on itself.

HOME COMING / THE WOUNDS OF WAR

Directly after Kyle has been exfiltrated from the firefight—a scene that ends with a fifteen-second brownout from the sandstorm—the film recommences with Kyle seated in a nearly empty bar. Taya calls and tells him she has heard he was on a flight. Asking if he is in Germany or something, she learns that Kyle is “stateside” and that he “just needed a minute.” He had been in Iraq, on his fourth deployment, for the last nine months.

Rather than the awkward, difficult, or tearful homecoming that is part of the standard syntax of war cinema, the film cuts immediately from the scene in the bar to a shot of Kyle sitting in a chair in the living room. As noted above, he appears to be watching TV as the sounds of war are heard on the soundtrack, including those of

helicopters, children screaming, and explosions. As the camera circles around him, the TV is shown to be dark: Kyle is staring at his own reflection. Called out of his reverie by Taya, who asks him to join her at a neighborhood barbecue, he erupts in a killing rage as the family dog begins pulling on his son's hoodie; he is stopped in his assault on the dog only by Taya's shouts. He then visits a VA hospital and speaks with a psychologist, who recommends talking with the other wounded veterans in the hospital.

American Sniper paints the VA hospital and the wounded veterans who live and meet there in a relaxed, naturalistic way, with none of the lurid expressionism that has attended these scenes in Vietnam War films such as *Born on the Fourth of July*. The veterans, despite their injuries, seem talkative and cheerful, and somewhat adjusted to now wholly transformed bodies and lives. One soldier, whom Kyle jokes with about his reputed boot collection, gives Kyle a fine pair of Western boots, a warm gesture that may also be a foreshadowing—the gift recalls, however obliquely, the boot exchange in *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), where a pair of excellent boots is passed from friend to friend as each, in turn, is killed. During this short, somewhat happier segment of the film, Kyle is seen reestablishing his bond with his son, his daughter, and his wife, and seemingly moving toward health. The demons of war—Kyle had been deployed “in country” for over one thousand days—seem for the moment to be at bay.

In the final scene, however, as Kyle stalks through the suburban house playacting a Western gunman, the film resumes a complex double voicing. Taya receives his performance with happy approval, as a sign that he has returned to health. The violence implied by the gun and the order to “drop your drawers, little lady” has moved into the imaginative realm, where it can be performed, seemingly without cost. But the sinister figure of the veteran waiting in the driveway for Kyle gives a different accent to this scene. As Taya looks out the kitchen door, the man stares back at her. The camera returns to Taya as Chris greets the man and gives him the plan for the day. In five increasingly close shots, she silently watches their exchange. The narrative of the film ends with a slow fade on Taya's face as she closes the kitchen door.



Taya, Chris Kyle's wife, looking at Chris for the last time. *American Sniper*, directed by Clint Eastwood, 2014. Produced by Clint Eastwood, Robert Lorenz, Andrew Lazar, Bradley Cooper, and Peter Morgan.

In Stahl's reading of the film, the pastoral provides a key interpretive frame, which he describes in terms of Michel Foucault's discussion of the pastoral as a model of patriarchal obedience.⁸ The enunciation of this theme by Kyle's father early in the film—in the analogy of the sheep, the sheepdog, and the wolves—can be understood in this way, as the assertion of a regulatory order, a system of control. And toward the close of the film, images of nature, animals, and the bucolic American life abound, as if a regular order, a stable world, could once again be found. Chris introduces his son to hunting, in a scene bathed in autumnal light, and takes his daughter to a ranch to admire a white horse, frisking in the sun. The pastoral's power as an allegory of order, however, is no sooner rendered than it is overturned. The roles described in the pastoral, as discussed above, are not stable—the protector becomes the prey, and even those who need protection (the vulnerable, the wounded, and the psychically damaged) can take on a predatory role. As the film informs us with a closing graphic title, "Chris Kyle was killed that day by a veteran he was trying to help."

CODA

In the film's second mourning and funeral sequence, which consists of documentary footage and still photographs of the biographical Chris Kyle's funeral, the iconography of nation and patriotism looms large. The funeral cortege, a large escort of police motorcycles

and squad cars, proceeds solemnly along the highways leading into Dallas, roadways that are lined with people paying their respects to Kyle, and crossed by bridges crowded with people waving flags and holding signs. As the procession moves into Cowboys Stadium, a series of still shots replaces the moving images, featuring a uniformed bugler, an honor guard of SEALs in formal wear, and photographs of the real-life Chris and Taya. A full choir, hushed but audible, back the trumpet solo that accompanies the scene. One of the last images of the film is a photo of a soldier in full combat gear, offering a salute, with the sun setting in the distance and a flag flying. The scene reads almost as an apotheosis.

The two mourning scenes depicted in the film seem to stand at antipodes to each other. The message of dissent that rang loudly in Marc's funeral is nowhere to be found in the documentary images of the final salute to Kyle. Instead, the closing scene marshals an array of patriotic images, sounds, and symbols. Viewed in a broader, intertextual light, Eastwood's use of real-life footage here might be compared to the coda of Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), a film that set out to demystify the discourse of heroism that pervaded the Seventh War Bond tour of World War II, an instance of manufactured patriotism that might be said to characterize American war culture as a whole. Snapshots and film footage of the actual American soldiers whose stories were dramatized in the film are rendered in a lengthy commemorative montage. Shots of ordinary GIs posing for the camera, running into the ocean to swim, and the like function as a closing counterweight, where life's quotidian pleasures are set against the constructed patriotic fervor that had distorted the lives of the men celebrated as flag raisers at the Battle of Iwo Jima. And in *Letters from Iwo Jima*, the counterpart to *Flags of Our Fathers*, Eastwood also employs a coda. A work that undercuts the Japanese wartime belief in the transcendent value of dying for the emperor and the sacred homeland, the ending shots of *Letters from Iwo Jima* emphasize ordinary emotions. Cutting from the closing scenes of the World War II story to an archaeological dig on the island some decades later, a bag of undelivered letters is found. As they are spilled out and cascade to the floor, a montage of voices suggesting those of the soldier-authors, long dead, suffuses the soundtrack. In both of these earlier war films, fabricated patriotism and the cultural

exploitation of the soldier's death as sacrifice is held up to scrutiny. In both codas, a seemingly prosaic, redemptive ending stands apart from the powerful critiques that shape each film as a whole.

The coda of *American Sniper*, however, carries a different semiotic valence, providing a kind of concrete instantiation, a documentary testament to the persistence of a concept of nation that remains in place, and has indeed been reinforced, in the twenty-first century, in which war, and the rhetoric and symbolism of soldiery, claim an out-sized symbolic importance. By the end of *American Sniper*, it is clear that the symbols of war as the emblems of patriotism have come detached from their referents. Portrayed as a soldier who has embraced an older vision of the American mission, Kyle has ardently subscribed to the traditional narratives of rescue, brotherhood, and sacrifice. He is killed, however, not by an enemy combatant but by a distressed former marine, another dark doppelgänger. Here, the poignancy of the film, and its tragic meaning, comes into focus. In the ceremonial tribute that closes the film, the reality of war, the moral, physical, and psychic decay it brings about, as well as the devastation it causes to ordinary people in both near and distant places, is set to one side. The iconography of military ritual, instead, dominates the stage, as if to acknowledge the fact that the symbols and narratives of war still hold an imaginative potency, despite all lessons to the contrary. Although *American Sniper* powerfully anatomizes the psychic and social costs of war in the twenty-first century, the beliefs and illusions that sustain the mentalité of the contemporary period are here given voice as well.

In this chapter, I have argued that *American Sniper* performs an immanent critique of war and the culture of violence that pervades American life, all while embedding its critical perspective in a form that gives credence to the commitment and sense of purpose of ordinary soldiers. In its use of genre conventions, the film employs a complex double voice: the spectacle and drama of combat is rendered in a familiar cinematic language of kinetic intensity, and then reframed, through patterns of doubling and reversal, to reveal the costs of war's violence, which in the words of Kyle's friend Marc "consumes one completely." This complex double voicing has led to an extremely mixed critical response, with many writers seizing on the

actions and words of the main character as a full-blown endorsement of the war in Iraq, despite Eastwood's repeated statements that the film is anti-war.⁹

A more subtle understanding of the film can be found in the work of writers such as Vito Zagarrío and James Curnow, who each argue that the biographical source material of the work—the memoir written by the historical Chris Kyle—would make impossible an explicitly anti-war statement on the part of the film. Zagarrío, in particular, notes that such an overt anti-war perspective would betray the convictions of the author, whose full-throated support of the American bloodletting in Iraq is explicit throughout the book. In a wide-ranging essay, he links the film to the critical perspective Eastwood displays in works such as *Gran Torino* (2008), *A Perfect World* (1993), and *Flags of Our Fathers*, in which the dominant fictions of American life are portrayed as both idealizing and disabling.¹⁰ Curnow, for his part, offers an intricate reading of the acting of Bradley Cooper in the title role, finding in his performance degrees of ambivalence and psychological tension that convey something not found on the pages of the memoir, an interior life fretted with self-awareness and perhaps even regret.¹¹ These critiques, in my view, engage with the film in a nuanced way.

What I am most interested in drawing into view with this chapter, however, is the film's overarching critique of the dominant fiction of the American past as it has been interpreted in twenty-first-century culture. The cult of the gun, the celebration of force, the magnified importance of violence as a reflex response to perceived vulnerability—the codes that have shaped the American national imaginary are explored here as both empowering and destructive. The film's closing narrative scene illustrates the conflict between the mythic memory and the reality of contemporary American life, as Kyle, six-gun in hand, acts the role of a Western gunman, only to be shortly cut down himself by a veteran suffering from PTSD. In a way, the "legend of the formation of the code," as Rancière has described the narrative thrust of the American cinema, is reenacted in this work and embodied in the main character, who carries the nickname "Legend."¹² Chris Kyle, however, is presented as both the avatar and the victim of this mythos. Attempting to embody a certain type of American stoic hero, grimly performing an implacable

role that has been inculcated in him by his father, by the SEALs, and by cultural stereotype, Kyle is beset by psychic and moral injury. The national story of the twenty-first century, the film suggests, carries within it a shadow narrative, one that has become increasingly manifest in social, subjective, and cultural life.