INTRODUCTION

THE GREAT SCHOLAR OF NATIONALISM Anthony D. Smith once wrote that the historical imaginary of certain nations has been beaten into common shape "by the hammer of incessant wars."[1] Prolonged warfare especially, he writes, provides the motive force for narratives and images that bolster a sense of cohesion and commonality, that stamp into lasting form a particular storyline of nation. From a certain perspective, the United States of the twenty-first century would appear to qualify as a nation whose self-image has been molded by war, a self-image renewed and reinforced in the current period not only by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also by a steady drumbeat of imagined and sometimes real threats promoted and amplified in various media—borders under siege, urban uprisings, armed militias, and shadowy agitators fomenting violence. The imagery of war and military ritual, moreover, has penetrated U.S. popular culture to an unprecedented degree, defining what might be called the mentalité of the period—a twenty-first-century warfare theme visible at political rallies and protests, sports events, commemorative flyovers, reenactments, and in the popularity of certain types of video games, paintball, street fashion, and even MREs (Meals Ready-to-Eat) among certain "prepper" populations. A heightened cultural investment in the iconography, imagery, and rhetoric of war has permeated post-9/11 national culture.

The narratives of social cohesion that incessant conflict supposedly supplies, however, are increasingly few. What Jacques Rancière once admiringly called "the dominant fiction" of the United States,

the fiction of the "birth of a nation" founded on both external and internecine struggle—an image of social consensus within which members of society are asked to identify themselves—has been refashioned into an image of nation in which a sense of permanent threat and division reigns.[2] Where Smith and Rancière saw a heightened, clarified storyline of nation, immediately recognizable to all, in the narratives that compose national identity, the dominant fiction of the United States has been transformed into a site of struggle in its own right, with competing historical narratives of nation at the center of protest and confrontation.

The contemporary U.S. war film, I argue, brings the antagonistic scripts of national life in the twenty-first century into heightened relief. One of the key genres of the dominant fiction as described by Rancière, the war film has served both as a crystallized expression of a narrative of power, founded on longstanding scenarios and imaginings, as well as the definitive genre of radical contestation. Its shaping of storylines has, at different times, served the ideological purposes of an imperialistic, hegemonic state, while at other times providing a counternarrative of protest and indictment. In the present period, however, narratives of war—mostly centered on omnipresent and elusive threats of terror and counterterror—unfold in an atmosphere of heightened fear and ontological uncertainty, where the combatants are mostly invisible and the codes and conventions of war, as it was once understood, appear to be relics of an older era. The American cinema, Rancière wrote, makes the same film over and over again, forging new iterations on the theme of "the legend of the formation of the code."[3] The contemporary war film, in contrast, pictures the cataclysmic collapse of the code and the emergence of a new set of themes, settings, and dramatis personae.

The films I treat in this study convey a particularly concentrated expression of this changing field of national imaginings. While carrying the deep imprint of the historical past and its shaping ideologies, the six films I consider here depict a world of conflict that can no longer be mapped according to the genre conventions of the past. One of the most dramatic changes I have discovered is the way the core story structures of many foundational U.S. narratives of war—the narrative of rescue, the story of heroic sacrifice, the drama of the mystic brotherhood found only on the battlefield, the ordeal of

citizen–soldiers trying to earn their way home—have been reduced to residual expressions, emptied of their original content and replaced with something else. The fading resonance of traditional genre codes also pertains, moreover, to the unifying counterthemes of the anti-war film, where war is pictured as traumatic and degenerate, the wasting of minds and bodies. In my view, neither the traditional codes of war representation nor the equally strong forms of the anti-war film speak to the contemporary historical moment, in which the old grammars of collective violence and resistance to violence have been changed into forms that have not yet been named or described.

In a recent study, film scholar Jonna Eagle argues that the post-9/11 period has been marked by a powerful recuperation of an older cultural paradigm of imperialism and affect, where themes of vulnerability and victimization give rise to compensatory forms of violent agency and fantasies of omnipotence. In political rhetoric and in many popular forms of cultural expression, the wounded national body of the United States in the post-9/11 period has been evoked as justification for an aggressive, violent national response, which carries with it an aura of virtue and righteousness. An older, essentially melodramatic cultural orientation, oscillating between pathos and violent action, provided a familiar paradigm that acquired new relevance after 9/11—the nation as both victimized and invincible. This approach had been articulated and conventionalized throughout the twentieth century in popular genres, such as the Western and the action film. As Eagle writes, "Injury and suffering are linked to the mobilization of violent agency, soliciting identification with a national subject who is constituted as at once vulnerable and powerful."[4]

There is much to consider in Eagle's perceptive diagnosis of the rhetoric of victimization and violence in American national culture, but what I would like to underscore, at least initially, is the emphasis she places on genre as a drive belt connecting the history of society and the history of aesthetic form. As I have argued elsewhere, genres serve as organs of memory for culture, retaining the imprint of the historical period from which they emerged, and carrying with them the layered record of their changing uses.[5] They "remember the past" and make their potentials available for the present.[6] As a genre that rose to prominence in 1898—almost at the beginnings of

the cinema—the U.S. war film provides an especially vivid example of genre memory, preserving in its forms and conventions the mediated memory of collective, historical events that have largely shaped the twentieth century. Carried forward from one decade to another, continuously re-inflected with changing generational perspectives and themes, the war film can be seen as a repository of aesthetic ideas concerning power, violence, trauma, honor, and death, a layered record that imbues these films with dense historical capacity. The past seems to circulate in the conventions of the form, acquiring new meanings with each iteration.

In the contemporary moment, however, a deep, fundamental alteration of codes and conventions can be discerned, a transformation of syntax and semantic meanings that is both manifest and subtle. The tectonic shifts now visible in the war film, I argue, expose changes in social reality itself. As the Russian Formalist theorist Pavel Medvedev has written, "Genre appraises reality and reality clarifies genre."[7]

In this volume, I examine several films that explore the changing faces of war and violence in the contemporary period, and that challenge the symbolic framework that representations of war have assumed to date. The films I consider illuminate forms and cultures of warfare that resist the aesthetic patterning to which we have become accustomed. Nowhere in these twenty-first-century works do we find straightforward expression of once familiar scripts—the narratives of sacrifice, heroism, or disillusionment that characterize the genre. Moreover, the forms of violence that these films place in dramatic relief—from the abjection of torture to the procedural violence of the "kill chain," from the hunter–killer paradigm of drone warfare to the visceral terror of the body bomb—cannot be readily accommodated in the frames of symbolic expression provided by an older, twentieth-century war cinema.

The symbolic meaning of violence—its justification or repudiation—is a question that runs like a main current through the genre. In these works, this question is reimagined in a way that touches on what is perhaps the most charged topic in war representation. Although the critical literature on this subject is too vast to summarize here, one of the insights I have found most compelling is Eagle's theme of violent agency as a response to a feeling of national

victimization, a theme that she finds in a number of film genres that exploit the affective power of what she calls "sensational melodrama." Spectacular, retributive violence can be scripted as a form of agency, she writes, and further, as a symbolic act of national renewal. This paradigm can be extended in a number of directions. For the literary historian Sarah Cole, for example, violence shapes aesthetic form in fundamental ways. Writing about the effects of World War I on Modernist literature, she distinguishes between what she calls works of enchanted violence, where the violence of war is transmuted through metaphor into an emblem of organic regeneration and renewal, and disenchanted violence, where war's violence is depicted as flat and empty, without symbolic value whatsoever. Most literary works of this period employ a combination of these two modes in representing violence in war. What is not possible, however, is to ignore it. As she writes, "Art neither flees violence, nor transcends it, nor merely represents it, but rather trades on its power."[8] Violence in war has also been represented as an experience of revelation. In the work of Yuval Noah Harari, battlefield experience, what he calls "flesh witnessing," is conceived as the shedding of illusions and the baring of the truth of the self and the world, a subject I will return to below.[9] More recently, an intriguing reading of the World War II combat film defines the spectacular violence of mass combat as an expression of the "destructive sublime."[10]

The violence depicted in films such as *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), *Eye in the Sky* (2015), and *American Sniper* (2014), however, cannot be readily mapped onto any of these symbolic topoi. In these films, war's violence is presented with extraordinary vividness and gravity, but the larger message it communicates is difficult to pin down. It serves neither as the sanguinary spectacle of redemption that powers many traditional war films, nor as an indictment of war's utter destructiveness and waste. Most surprisingly, the bitter violence of war in these films is depicted chiefly through the experience of the other—the enemy combatant under torture, the last moments of an unwilling suicide bomber, the innocent child caught in the "kill box" of a drone attack. The depiction of violence here is all the more disturbing in that it seems to be absorbed by the Western protagonists of these films almost as their own experience—a mirroring transfer of affect in which the signs of pathos, of visible suffering and loss, are

shifted from the victims of the action to the agents. This complicated shift of affect alters the symbolic framework of the war narrative.

And it is here that I see the beginning outlines of a theme resisting the argument for violence as empowering agency, as a righteous response to vulnerability, which clearly animates many earlier war films. Where wounding and victimization once provided the springboard for symbolic displays of punitive and spectacular retribution in the genre films astutely considered by Eagle, the films I treat in this study pointedly undercut the gestures of triumphalism and omnipotence that inhere in much war representation. Although the emotion of vulnerability and the perception of victimization are threaded through these works in complex ways, the symbolic value of violent retribution and the celebration of force as national virtue is suspended. In some cases, the sensationalized violence of the war film genre is criticized, even while it is employed, conveying a kind of complicitous critique, to borrow a phrase from Linda Hutcheon.[11] While stopping short of an explicit anti-war stance, several of the works I treat in this study, including *Zero Dark Thirty* and *American Sniper,* conclude with sober reflections on the costs of violence as a reflex response to a sense of vulnerability. The well-rehearsed genre discourses of war cinema, oscillating between pathos and violent agency, may still inhere in the plot structures of these works, but their symbolic power has been etiolated, drained of any signifying reach.

The power of violence as an aesthetic device, of course, is manifest throughout the history of the genre; the mass choreography of the assault, the shadowy terror of the night patrol, the gruesome intensity of man-to-man fighting, are fulsomely represented in most war films. In my view, however, the narrative and thematic character of violence has shifted in contemporary films, illustrated by the surprising transfer of affect and pathos described above. As a way of mapping the contours of this change, I here briefly summarize one important study of the ways violence has been represented in narratives of war, and the symbolic value it has acquired. Harari argues that war representation underwent an especially revealing transformation with the rise of what he calls flesh witnessing in soldier memoires, a shift that elevated the somatic experience of violence in combat into the singular locus of authenticity and truth.[12]

Sensory experience, he writes, became increasingly valued as a mode of knowledge and privileged insight during the Napoleonic Wars. In earlier periods, soldier narratives of war focused strictly on deeds and events, on the honorary and instrumental actions of combat. In the Romantic period, however, with its growing trust in the senses and the expanding importance assigned to individual experience, warfare began to be understood through a different lens. The senses were now seen as a source of knowledge and even of revelation, and the experience of violence in war was conceived as providing access to a privileged truth about the soldier, war, and the world.

Harari's idea of war's violence as revelation—flesh witnessing as the ultimate truth—provides a powerful description of the classic combat film and its more modern variants, with their characteristic focus on states of heightened psychological and emotional experience amid physical struggle. A film such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979), for example, with its sinister epiphanies, or the grim moments of truth in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and *Platoon* (1986), or the existential turning points of films such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Courage under Fire* (1996), are shaped around scenes of illumination—war as a kind of Dantean bildung. The films I consider here, however, speak to a different understanding. It is difficult to read the violence of *Zero Dark Thirty, The Hurt Locker* (2008), or *Eye in the Sky* in terms of revelation of ultimate truth—a scheme that pervades the imaginative frames of twentieth-century war narratives. Instead, the violence of war is threaded onto an emerging cultural script for conflict—and character—that would be unrecognizable in the narrative worlds of the past. In the drone warfare depicted in *Eye in the Sky,* for example, the targeted violence of the drone strike comes to represent, in the logic of the film, a perverse synthesis of killing and saving, destroying and protecting. And in *Zero Dark Thirty,* for another example, the climactic killing of Osama bin Laden is presented not as a triumphal victory over the ultimate terrorist but as a kind of exorcism, a deed shrouded in night and shadow, screened from the camera's view—an attempt, perhaps, to deny bin Laden a place in the film's larger symbolic order. The strange, unfamiliar patterns of meaning that violence assumes in the war films of the twenty-first century has proven to be one of the most challenging questions I have undertaken in this study.

As I argue in this book, two distinct cultural imaginaries have formed around the subject of contemporary war: one centered on advanced weaponry, remote targeting, and "bodiless" practices of war; the other shaped by the mystique of combat as the ultimate embodied encounter. The films in this study appear to be split between these dramatically different paradigms. In certain works, such as *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Eye in the Sky,* extended sequences detail the gathering and shaping of data into operational vectors of attack, powerfully capturing both the allure and the costs of networked war. In others, such as *The Hurt Locker, Restrepo* (2010), and *American Sniper,* the visceral, sensory experience of combat registers as the core subject of the work, providing a close-up view of what the critical geographer Derek Gregory calls the "corpography" of war—a form of sensory awareness, an embodied knowledge of space, terrain, and potential threat that exceeds the disciplines of traditional military planning and intelligence: "By 'corpography' I mean a mode of apprehending, ordering and knowing the battle space through the body as an acutely physical field."[13] These distinct styles of war representation—one defined by technocratic proceduralism, the other by the paradigm of war as extreme corporeal risk—speak to a dichotomy at the heart of the question of how war is imagined today. On the one hand, a fascination with overarching networks of electronic surveillance and sophisticated signals analysis—the prosecution of war at a distance—permeates military theory and planning, expressed in the current enthusiasm for drone warfare, with its illusion of precision. On the other, the imaginative primacy of physical, sensory engagement in combat, where the body at risk takes center stage, has taken hold in many precincts of contemporary life, from combat simulations to the popularity—and almost mythic reputation—of elite combat units such as the Navy SEALs and Delta Force.

Several writers, including Garrett Stewart and Patricia Pisters, have detailed the increasing dominance of the apparatuses of technological war in the narrative representation of combat. Stewart has complained of a diminishing narrative traction in these films, where the great set pieces of war cinema—the mass assault, the stealth incursion into hostile territory, the individual acts of self-sacrifice—seem to have disappeared. What has replaced the traditional dramatic patterning of war cinema, in Stewart's view, is a kind

of optical war, a "battle of the screens," lacking force or urgency. In film after film of the early 2000s, he writes, a sense of "digital fatigue" has eroded the energy of the genre.[14] The digital turn in the filmic representation of war that Stewart decries, however, can be seen in a different way, as an aftereffect, an echo of a shift in practical war theory and strategy in the late 1990s, a shift that has come to be enshrined in the phrase "the revolution in military affairs." In the context of war planning and conflict theory, the superiority of virtual, networked war has attained almost doctrinal status. Strategies for wars conducted almost entirely with remote weaponry have, in turn, given rise to a seductive—and deceptive—neologism, "postheroic war," where the soldiers of the dominant power wage war strictly from a distance, far removed from the battle space and actual physical jeopardy. In this paradigm, war has become largely virtual, without risk and without consequence, at least for the soldiers wielding these weapons—virtual war reimagined as "virtuous" war.[15] Where Stewart discerns a shift in film genre codes, the concept of war as virtual—and postheroic—has achieved wide acceptance in military planning.

Nevertheless, a countercurrent can be discerned in the heightened visceral realism of many scenes in the films I treat in this study, sequences that emphasize corporeal experience in a way that comes to feel like a dramatic reassertion of the core principle of war representation—the recuperation of somatic violence into some kind of meaningful frame. In several scenes in these works, tactile images predominate—the stickiness of blood, the pain and panic of torture, the concussion of a roadside bomb—underscoring the power of somatic experience depicted in film and its status as the irreducible subject matter of war cinema. Here too, however, a marked change can be discerned. Not only have the expressive, symbolic dimensions of violence in the war film been reimagined, but the protagonists of the combat narrative have changed as well, in fundamental ways. The major players in *The Hurt Locker, A Private War* (2018), *Zero Dark Thirty,* and *American Sniper* all exhibit a common and surprising trait. Exceptionally skillful, gifted in their tradecraft and fieldwork, they are driven by what Thomas Elsaesser calls a condition of "productive pathology"—an ability to perform that is helped rather than hindered by pathological tendencies. What

would ordinarily be seen as self-destructive and lethally dangerous behavior, where compulsion, obsessiveness, and an attraction to extreme danger places others at risk along with the protagonist, becomes a key to the character's success—and a necessary tool of survival. Nowhere in the war films of the past do we find similar protagonists, characters who continuously push themselves to the edge, as Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner) in *The Hurt Locker* and Marie Colvin (Rosamund Pike) in *A Private War* repeatedly do. In these figures, the styles of behavior once reserved in films of war for the soldier who has "crossed the line" into suicidal recklessness are here treated, with minor differences, as essential to the arc of the narrative.

Another striking change in the war films of the current period is the emergence of female characters as principal agents of the narrative. In three of the six films I treat in this study—*Zero Dark Thirty, Eye in the Sky,* and *A Private War*—women are not only central to the stories, they generate the events of the plot, pushing the narrative forward at each of its defining points. Yvonne Tasker has written of certain earlier depictions of female soldiers, such as we see in the films *GI Jane* (1997) and *Courage under Fire*, as "masculinized," women performing a role that has simply been borrowed, more or less whole cloth, from stereotypical male styles of combat performance.[16] Recent portrayals, however, such as the CIA agent Maya (Jessica Chastain) in *Zero Dark Thirty,* or Colonel Katherine Powell (Helen Mirren) in *Eye in the Sky,* or Marie Colvin in *A Private War,* are far different. For one thing, they are not defined by the bildungsroman formula of so many war films—the emergence of the young man through the experience of violence and loss—a paradigm that informs such well-known works as *Platoon, Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), *Full Metal Jacket,* and *Fury* (2014). The existential education of the young soldier in the grim truths that only battlefield experience reveals is nowhere on the agenda of *Zero Dark Thirty* or *Eye in the Sky*. Rather, the female characters in these films are portrayed in ways that are entirely unfamiliar, providing each film with a protagonist that cannot readily be mapped onto past iterations.

The shifts that I describe here are highlighted by the importance of the filmmaker Kathryn Bigelow in transforming the genre of the war film. The prominence of Bigelow, director of the two works that

form the opening chapters of this study, *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty,* marks a further turn away from the relentlessly masculine gendering of both character and authorship in the genre. While women filmmakers have directed films of war, including Agnieszka Holland with *In Darkness* (2011), Gillian Armstrong with *Charlotte Gray* (2001), and Angelina Jolie with *Unbroken* (2014)—all set in World War II—the visibility of Bigelow as the director of what are arguably the two most celebrated and influential war films of the twenty-first century is noteworthy. Both *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty* bring an entirely new perspective to the war film genre, exposing and decoding the violence of contemporary war—whose forms and characteristics, I argue, have changed—and featuring protagonists who possess none of the characteristics of the charismatic hero. The violence that initiates and permeates both films, for example, varies dramatically from what we have seen in films before. Here, IEDs, suicide bombers, corpse bombs, and sudden terror attacks are set against the institutionalized torture and high-tech killing administered by American agents. Mortal threat, in the worlds portrayed in *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty,* is embedded in the daily textures of life in a period of conflict that seems to have no limit. In both films, moreover, the protagonists, William James and Maya are portrayed as solitary, enigmatic, and wholly identified with their war work in a way that precludes any sense of genre familiarity or the possibility of gaining a larger insight into character. Bigelow's work disarms genre expectations and creates a new language of combat violence that will come to have a paramount influence on the way war is imagined and represented in the twenty-first century.

Changes in film genres of this magnitude are generally discovered only retrospectively, as new forms of symbolic expression are shaped not by a singular event but a complex array of social and historical factors. Although the attacks of 9/11 mark a decisive break point in American social and political history—an event that demarcates the "before" of the twentieth century from the "after" of the twenty-first—aesthetic transformations such as I describe occur not as a punctual reaction but rather by way of accretion, as a cultural response to a series of mutations in social life, historical experience, and aesthetic form. A comparison might be drawn to the retrospective construction of film noir, which was earlier called the

psychological thriller. The shifts in form and content in what has become one of the most celebrated film genres of the twentieth century were not identified and named until well after many of the classic examples of the form had appeared, including films such as *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Scarlet Street* (1945), and *In a Lonely Place* (1950). And there is still a lively intellectual debate over the relative importance of various cultural, historical, and artistic influences in shaping this now-canonical genre, ranging from the influence of German Expressionism, to postwar trauma, to the displacement of the male subject in the postwar economy, to the popularity of psychoanalysis in the period.

Identifying the historical events and aesthetic changes that have led to the shifts I describe is thus a challenge I approach with caution, although some provisional thoughts and speculations are worth sharing. First, the events of 9/11 precipitated fundamental changes in the broad sense of national identity in the United States—the complex array of myth and history, daily life and social ritual, collective practices and the symbols of belonging, usually underpinned by narrative—that creates a sense of national coherence. Although 9/11 catalyzed an immediate and initially powerful rehearsal of national symbols and signs of collective purpose—the raising of the flag on the ruins of Ground Zero, the twin beams of light emanating from the destruction, and somewhat later George W. Bush's "Mission Accomplished" speech on the deck of an aircraft carrier—symbols and gestures that evoked the iconic imagery of earlier wars—it was clear that something fundamental had changed. The older narrative and symbolic construction of nation—as a gleaming and inviolate city upon a hill, as a land of many peoples forged in a singular union, secure in its territorial boundaries—could no longer capture the new historical reality of sudden mass terror, nor imaginatively assuage the sense of national vulnerability and insecurity that had taken hold.

Moreover, the cynical exploitation of the imagery of threat, visible especially in the escalation of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant bias, congealed into a competing narrative of nativist belonging. The invisible threads of terror, with its hidden networks and shadowy alliances, seemed, for some, to penetrate the subjective experience

of daily life, giving rise to a widespread sense of insecurity and of a nation at risk—a sense of cultural and historical instability that has played out in a wide range of social manifestations. What I describe above as the dominant fiction, the imaginative constructs that give coherence to national life, began to collapse. As concepts of nation began to shift, the genre forms and narratives that buttress a sense of belonging and belief began to change as well, their affective currents began to flow in new and different directions. In particular, the genre of the war film, with its stories of sacrifice, rescue, and brotherhood, and the equally powerful form of the anti-war film, with its scenes of moral reckoning and personal and collective loss, has been converted to the expression of something else.

The stories and themes associated with the traditional war film, however—the great dramatic narratives of collective power marshaled to protect or restore a civilizational order—have not disappeared altogether, but have migrated to the Superhero genre. Here a confederation of heroes, each with different strengths and hailing from different spheres of disparate worlds, lines up against the forces of galactic evil. In the Superhero genre, we find a return to the themes of brotherhood, to the narrative of rescue, to the scene of heroic sacrifice—narrative tropes that can no longer be directly expressed, or that no longer have signifying reach, in a war film genre whose major social and cultural role has shifted.

And here I will offer a second speculation concerning the causes, or at least one of the corollaries, of the changes I discern. In a historical moment when the imagery and rhetoric of war is ascendant on the domestic front, the war film as genre now seems to engage dialogically with contemporary scenes of domestic conflict that have rocked civil society in the United States, conflicts that often carry a violent, warlike accent. The tone and emotional color of these films resonates in some perhaps unspecifiable way with the aggravated tensions that now permeate contemporary political and social life and have resulted in an increasingly divisive experience of nation. The films I treat in this study are dominated by a sense of continuous threat, traumatic loss, and the internal violence that imbues many of the characters' psychic lives. Endless wars without a mission have become the ground and the basic semantic material for heightened

dramas of existential risk without resolution or redemption, characteristics that now define ordinary experience in the homeland as well.

More concretely—and here I will set forth a third hypothesis—the peculiar features of war in the twenty-first century place a particular and novel pressure on the conventions of war cinema. The anonymity of the enemy; the geographical remoteness of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; the endlessly deferred moments of triumph or defeat in conflicts that have been aptly named the "forever wars"; the repeated and multiple deployments of troops, in a series of "surges" that have little effect; the prosecution of war at a distance, in which the soldier, following a killing mission, resumes a conventional, civilian and suburban life in the evening after work; the invisibility of both the agents and the victims of war, as more and more fighting is carried out in drone strikes or in top secret raids conducted by "black ops" soldiers; the blurring of the lines between enlisted soldiers and contractors; the almost complete absence of public awareness, despite the relentless exploitation of soldiers for public relations purposes. If we look to the films themselves, the lingering mood is one of fraught emotional suspension: there is no teleological resolution in these works.

Several films, including *Zero Dark Thirty, The Hurt Locker, A Private War,* and *Eye in the Sky,* conclude with scenes that suggest that war in the twenty-first century is a permanent, ongoing condition, that the cycle of violence continues, that the few moments of charged collective engagement in scenes of traditional martial struggle lead almost nowhere. The wars continue and the soldier fights alone. In many ways, the films of this study push up against the unsayable, refuting ordinary forms of symbolic and imaginative resolution, confounding any kind of mastery through narrative, while at the same time demanding to be seen and heard.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

In the first chapter, I consider Kathryn Bigelow's Best Picture Award–winning film *The Hurt Locker,* arguing that it serves as both the aesthetic summa and the final curtain of the traditional war film genre. Evoking the major motifs and themes of war cinema, including the rescue narrative and the pathos of individual sacrifice, *The Hurt*

Locker indexes the emotional power the formulas of the past once carried, and then quietly dramatizes their fading resonance for the new wars of the twenty-first century. Sergeant William James, the leader of the bomb disposal squad and the protagonist of the film, embodies both consummate skill and a compulsive attraction to danger. James's flamboyant, almost theatrical performances, his deliberate pursuit of the extreme edge of risk in disarming hidden explosives, evince a heightened vocation for war—like a Navy SEAL or a Delta Force soldier whose rarified skills are designed for combat, and who cannot function effectively in any other setting.

Yet for all its close attention to this uncharted zone of combat experience, *The Hurt Locker* is in many ways a deeply historical text, engaging with the history of war representation in film while at the same time refusing the symbolic solutions, the deep appeal to codes of collective belief that create a "feeling of commonality" as described by film scholar Hermann Kappelhoff. In the gap between the conventions of the past, where embodied violence was often given a redemptive shape, and the unredeemed violence in war films of the twenty-first century, the film finds its dramatic subject and complex mode of address. *The Hurt Locker* recalls older codes and conventions of the war film, summoning them as a form of genre memory, only to sweep them away in new forms of violent encounter.

In chapter 2, I explore the unlikely combination of embodied violence and procedural analysis that takes shape around the hunt for Osama bin Laden in *Zero Dark Thirty*. The expressive violence depicted in the film is both intimate and enacted at a distance, rendered in the haptic assaults of torture, terror, and violent attack that bookend the narrative, and expressed, in the middle section, in the dragnet of surveillance and tracking data constructed to track bin Laden, where each data point, terrorist photograph, and intercepted communication maps a history of violence and a script for potential attack. *Zero Dark Thirty*'s detailed exploration of counterterrorism—including its depiction of torture and rendition, the secret raid on bin Laden's compound, and the umbrella of surveillance that has been superimposed on global life—conveys the present historical moment in all its dark reality, while at the same time opening a space of imaginative projection.

The main character, Maya, provides a critical link among the three

sections of the film, a character whose intelligence, willingness to do the dirty work, and implacable resolve form the center of the drama. A new kind of agent of war, Maya conveys an unsettling ambiguity, displaying exceptional skill and focus, with none of the characteristics of the charismatic hero. In a film that has few of the tropes or characteristics conventionally associated with war cinema, its most compelling figure is the character of Maya, who seems to come from a variant genre that has not yet been named.

In chapter 3, I explore the aura of technological and psychological invincibility that has emerged around drone warfare, a weapons system that has radically transformed military tactics in the West and assumed an almost magical potency in the wider life of culture. Looking closely at the dramatic film *Eye in the Sky,* I consider the transformative role of the drone in the conceptual and practical frameworks of war, detailing the way it has overturned traditional models of hostile and friendly territory, lethal force, and even notions of the battlefield itself.

Eye in the Sky centers on the moral, existential, and tactical issues that confront the drone pilots, military commanders, and political and legal staffs—the "kill chain" of drone warfare—as they plan and execute a strike on a terrorist cell in Kenya, a "friendly" country with which the West is not at war. Complicating the tactical, legal, and political calculus that must be considered in authorizing and executing the strike, the members of the kill chain must also consider that an innocent bystander, a young girl named Alia, has wandered into the blast zone just before the launch. The film illustrates how the drone, far from encouraging an abstract, distanced, "bloodless" form of killing as is so often imagined, foregrounds a palpable intimacy with the victim, an almost tactile contact between the victims and the agents of violence.

The story of Marie Colvin, a celebrated American war correspondent who worked for the British *Sunday Times* and was murdered by the Syrian military in 2013, brings several new dimensions of contemporary war into view, as discussed in chapter 4. Colvin's primary focus as a conflict journalist was the deliberate targeting of civilians as a strategy of war. Her heroic commitment to exposing the suffering of women and children in conflict zones throughout the world, however, came with great costs. *A Private War* frames the

story of Colvin with two sequences in which she is attacked by soldiers: opening with a scene of a grenade attack that costs her the vision in her left eye, and concluding with the missile attack in Homs, Syria, which cost her her life.

In its portrayal of Colvin, the film explores both the subjectivity of the main character—driven by ambition and plagued by traumatic memory—as well as the shifting frames of war in twenty-first-century conflict, where stories of atrocity reported by war journalists are perceived as a direct threat to powerful regimes. Colvin as protagonist represents a new turn in the cinematic representation of combat and a new figuration of the war correspondent—a woman whose talent and courage carry a self-destructive charge, whose drive for direct, visceral experience become an addiction—another example of the productive pathology that distinguishes the lead characters of many of the films in this study.

Chapter 5 examines how four documentary projects produced by photographer Tim Hetherington and the writer Sebastian Junger in Afghanistan raise several challenging issues of war representation. Embedded for over a year with soldiers from Battle Company, an army detachment in a remote outpost in the Korengal Valley, Hetherington and Junger's work brings into view critical concerns about the role and objectivity of embedded journalists in war. Some writers have faulted *Restrepo,* for example, for not being sufficiently critical, for being partial to the soldiers, perhaps even complicit with acts of violence in war, with one calling it a "paramilitary film."[17] I argue that the film, far from endorsing war, conveys a complex and subtle critique. Evoking the cultural history embedded in genre, the film can be seen as an example of double voicing, as it calls up the memory of past war representations to open a channel to a deeper reading of the text.

The photographs collected in the large photo book *Infidel* by Hetherington and Junger, in contrast, depict the soldiers of Battle Company engaged in the quotidian activities of life in the outpost, punctuated by scenes of the men on patrol and in combat. In many of these images, the soldiers are depicted performing what Kristen Whissel calls the masculine "rhetoric of soldiery"—working out, wielding weapons and carrying ammunition, comparing tattoos, wrestling, and sometimes displaying open affection for one

another.[18] Other photographic images—such as the shot of the exhausted, perhaps traumatized soldier Brandon Olson, the World Press Photo Award winner in 2008—communicate a very different message, conveying isolation, psychological injury, and dread.

The short photo essay by Hetherington, *Into the Korengal,* published in 2011, departs from the almost exclusive focus on American troops that defines the main body of Hetherington and Junger's work in the Korengal, focusing on Afghan males, of different ages, interacting with the soldiers of Battle Company. Although the photo essay is short—it contains only eight images, accompanied by Hetherington's written commentary—it is instructive, suggesting an incipient counternarrative to the one-sided depictions in Western media. It shows Afghan men engaging with and reacting to U.S. soldiers in a way that reveals something of the emotional dynamics of occupation. These images of Afghan males, as infrequent as they are, serve as counterpoint to the Western stereotype of Afghanistan masculinity as "belligerent, dead, or absent," in the words of the photography scholar Saumava Mitra.[19]

The short video that Hetherington released at roughly the same time as *Restrepo, Sleeping Soldiers—single screen* (2009), serves as a complement and accompaniment to the feature-length film, bringing different themes to light. Originating as a series of still photographs of the soldiers of Battle Company sleeping in the small mountain redoubt nicknamed OP Restrepo, Hetherington superimposed live-action scenes and recorded sounds and voices on still shots to create a short film that is associative, dreamlike, and haunted. In the video, the faces of the soldiers are unmarked and youthful. Layered over their sleeping faces, however, are the sounds and images of battle and the voices of colleagues in distress, suggesting the penetration of violence into the deep fabric of psychic life.

In chapter 6, I argue that *American Sniper* performs an immanent critique of war and the culture of violence that pervades American life, while embedding its critical perspective in a form that gives full 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 psychic and

social costs of war's violence, which in the words of one character "consumes one completely." The film presents a complex dramatization of PTSD and moral injury. The feral violence of war, which is rendered with gruesome intensity in the scenes set in Iraq, penetrates the psychic life of the character Chris Kyle, the legendary sniper of the film's title, who returns, again and again, for multiple deployments in Iraq. On his returns home, however, between deployments, the psychological toll manifests itself. As Kyle's psychic stability degenerates, the extreme violence of the Iraq War—the violence he witnesses and the violence he metes out—follows him into the domestic spaces of his suburban home. Brooding, unresponsive, subject to hallucinations, the character becomes a danger to himself and his family.

The film explores the dark underside of one of the most foundational enabling myths of American culture, the strand of the dominant fiction that celebrates violent agency as a way of protecting the vulnerable and preserving the institutions of American life. In the film's depiction of the character of Chris Kyle, the costs of endless war are represented in a way that speaks to a larger contemporary social reality, where the combat soldier returns, often damaged and unstable, not to a diurnal homeland of pastoral beauty, but to a shadow world filled with imagined threats and permeated by guilt.

The films I consider in this volume play a critical role in bringing into focus the way war is imagined and represented in the twenty-first century, where ingrained patterns of expression and meaning—the narrative structures that have underpinned representations of war for well over a century—have been emphatically altered. Each chapter examines a different aspect of the evolving face of war representation, changes that reflect a shift not only in the aesthetics of genre but in military practices, social behaviors, and what is considered acceptable as a cost of war. The power of cinema to illuminate the historical continuities and changes in the national imaginary that the war film brings into relief provides the impetus for this book.