Turner's Iraq: The New American Frontier

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Inception:

This paper was writing in Dr. Jason Yaremko's class, 'Frontiers and Borderlands,' in the Department of History.

Abstract:

This paper examines how the Iraq War was portrayed by the United States Government, American News Media and Hollywood films as a new American Frontier. Through an analysis of *The Frontier in American History* by Frederick Jackson Turner, a historical and popular concept of the American Frontier is established. By using this to explore the rhetoric used in addresses by the Bush Administration, popular news media and the films *American Sniper*, *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty* it is found that the Iraq War was marketed to the American public as a frontier that required intervention.

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After the events of September 11, 2001, America was thrown into a state of panic and confusion over what happened and what this meant for the everyday lives of the citizens of the United States, and the relationship their country had with the rest of the world. 9/11 would prove to be the catalyst for the American involvement in two major armed conflicts: The Afghanistan War and the Iraq War, each beginning within two years of one another. While the motive behind the invasion of Afghanistan was obvious to the American citizen, launching one month after 9/11 and after multiple years of Osama bin Laden being wanted by America, Iraq was different. The Iraq War began two years after 9/11 with the context of a war on terror and

the toppling of a dictatorial regime. This war needed to be marketed to the American public using the growing media landscape that was accessible to the masses in order to gain public support and bring forth a sense of nationalism. Through an examination of the ways that major American news outlets portrayed the Iraq War, as well as the ways American intervention has been portrayed in *The Hurt Locker, Zero Dark Thirty and American Sniper*, this paper will show how the Iraq War was a prime example of colonialism perpetrated by America and sold to the American public as a process of civilizing and democratizing a new American frontier.

The American people needed to be sold a reason to send their troops overseas again, and in a way that was fast and familiar to their audience. As an interviewee stated in *Weapons of Mass Persuasion* by Paul Rutherford the media campaign for the war was necessary "or else people are going to turn off, from apathy they're going to become frustrated and start asking questions about why so many of their civil liberties are being curtailed."[1] With an ever-growing and ever-hungry news media, combined with an increased presence of online media in America, the United States had many tools at their disposal to achieve the crafting of a new narrative to cover American imperialism. The choice of narrative however was nothing new to Americans; in fact, it dated back to the late nineteenth century, as Frederick Jackson Turner studied American westward expansion and crafted his Frontier Thesis through the portrayal of settlers in the American West.

Through its early portrayal of the American frontier and the work where the Turner first developed his Frontier Thesis, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* by Frederick Jackson Turner stands out as an early collection of essays detailing the supposed great American Frontier. Turner excitedly details what

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[1] Paul Rutherford, *Weapons of Mass Persuasion: Marketing the War Against Iraq* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 184.

the frontier meant to those who came to settle upon it and those who took part in the early study of colonial expansion in America. To Turner, the exploration of the frontier represented American development through the recession of "free land."[2] This land was necessary for the growth of American independence and nationalism.[3] In fact to Turner the frontier was not only the birthplace of American nationalism, the civilization and conquering of nature and the fulfillment of manifest destiny, but the frontier was the birthplace of modern democracy itself.[4]

Ultimately, Turner's frontier could be boiled down to a simple binary. This binary was between the civilized human and the dangerous 'savage,' or the 'Indians' who lived on the frontier before Americans ventured into the west. Indigenous peoples were described by Turner as posing a constant danger to the colonial settler, to the point that it was necessary for the settler to build forts to keep themselves safe from the dangers of the frontier.[5] Throughout his writings Turner emphasizes this binary, depicting the frontier as a meeting place between the white saviour who aided the 'Indians' through trade, democracy and the conquering and civilizing of the natural world. No agency is given to any peoples who were not American (including to some extent Europeans) with very few named indigenous peoples being given a voice throughout his writing. Little indication is given that any transactions took place from the 'savage' to the civilized that aided the settler, only interactions that posed a threat to the settler or involved the settler civilizing the 'savage.'[6] Turner saw the American West as a land ruled by a binary that only American settlers could change, creating the framework of

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[2] Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), 1.

[3] Ibid., 24.

[4] Ibid., 293.

[5] Ibid., 13.

[6] Ibid.

the great American frontier. The binary of civilized and savage goes far beyond a simple discussion of skin colour for Turner though. Turner saw the American man as a unique individual, breeding a form of American exceptionalism that will continue to play out in narratives for the century to follow.

Looking back at Turner's thesis with our current understandings of colonialism, it does not hold up as the story of how strong individuals conquered nature and 'won the West'. Westward expansion was far from an individual effort. Government spending greatly helped those who were interested in expanding into territory that was rightfully occupied by indigenous peoples. This New World continues to be exploited through the colonization efforts of the Old World, building familiar trade routes and continuing ties to Old World finances.[7] Turner saw the Old World as limiting to the conquering of the American frontier, stating that 'the East' (the English government, along with certain colonies along the eastern coast of America) was actively attempting to limit the westward expansion of America.[8]

The frontier seen in Turner's writings is one that is continually portrayed in the media, whether it appears in movies from the Western genre depicting the cowboys fighting 'Indians', to concepts of indigeneity as expressed through national sports teams (e.g. Cleveland Indians, Chicago Blackhawks, Washington Redskins). This idealized notion of early American history has been repeatedly used as a convenient way to sell colonialism to the colonizers, preach American exceptionalism, and white supremacy to American audiences. Adopting the frontier for use in other forms of propaganda is an ideal way to build a popular and master narrative that will garner support from a population. Through the reduction of

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[7] Chris Rojek, "F.J. Turner's 'Frontier Thesis': The Ruse of American 'Character,'" *European Journal of Social Theory* 20, no. 2 (May 1, 2017): 239-240.

[8] Turner, *The Frontier in American History, 34-35.*

a group of people that are not identified as American through racial slurs and frequent exposure to images of violence against and perpetrated by a minority group, it is easier to justify violence, death or torture, as long as it is done in the name of America and the concept of freedom.[9]

The quest to build the new American Frontier officially began when President Bush held a live televised address on March 17, 2003 giving an ultimatum to the leader of Iraq, Saddam Hussein: leave Iraq within forty-eight hours or face American invasion. In the address, the rhetoric that Bush employed is intentionally nationalistic. President Bush spoke of a nation that required American settlement to prevent it from being a danger to those around it and a danger to American citizens. The fear of the other was still in the air and framing a dictatorial regime on another continent as an entity that posed a personal danger to the every-day American citizen was both important and could be achieved with ease. Bush tossed aside the efforts of the United Nations at inspecting Iraq and their efforts at brokering peace in the region in favour of what was portrayed as a last resort. The only option, according to the President, was for American intervention to disarm and dismantle a regime that "has a deep hatred of America."[10] On March 19, 2003, President Bush stayed true to his word and in a televised address to the nation, announced the invasion of Iraq. The rhetoric of this speech was much like the ultimatum: Americans were conducting military operations to provide freedom and peace to both the country of Iraq and to the people of America. "Our nation enters

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[9] Ken Betsalel and Mark Gibney, "Can A Film End A War?," *Human Rights Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (May 11, 2008): 522.

[10] George W. Bush, "Archive: George Bush Threatens Iraq 03-17-03 Pt 1 - YouTube," accessed January 25, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WS5AYQX1m6c&t=7s.

this conflict reluctantly."[11] Bush announced to the world that if there were another option, America would not have to send their military into Iraq.[12] The idea of the frontier lives in the rhetoric of the words of the President, as much as they live in the name given to the placement of American troops in Iraq: Operation Iraqi Freedom (later renamed Operation New Dawn under the Obama Administration in 2010[13]). Thus, the conflict, which would evolve into an eight-year war, was officially described as an American attempt to free a country from a dictatorial regime, both to civilize the Iraqi citizen and to keep America safe.

Now that the Iraq War had officially started, the marketing campaign for public support of the conflict began. The Iraq War started during an election year, and the narrative of Americans civilizing a frontier could provide good optics for the presidential race. President George W. According to the Gallup poll, the Iraq War had given the President quite a boost in his approval ratings, which were already quite high (57 percent approval in February, 2003 to 71 percent within a month).[14] The method of marketing this narrative would initially involve lobbying and the employment of advertising executives by the Bush administration[15] but would develop into a larger effort to work with and direct twenty-four-hour news networks such as CNN, NBC and Fox News to effectively advertise this new

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[11] George W. Bush, "President Bush Announces Start of Iraq War - YouTube," accessed January 25, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Bwxl_l84dc&t=78s.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Steve Clemons, "Gates to Petraeus: 'Iraqi Freedom' to Become 'New Dawn,'" *Huffington Post*, April 20, 2010, acessed January 27, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/steve-clemons/gates-to-petraeus-iraqi-f_b_468166.html.

[14] Gallup Inc, "Presidential Approval Ratings -- George W. Bush," Gallup, accessed January 28, 2018, http://news.gallup.com/poll/116500/Presidential-Approval-Ratings-George-Bush.aspx.

[15] Rutherford, *Weapons of Mass Persuasion*, 29.

American frontier as the story developed in real-time. As Dick Cheney said: "You don't have to believe me. Believe *The New York Times.*"[16]

As in the falsehoods found in the writings of Turner on indigenous peoples and the colonization that they would face in the name of Manifest Destiny, the Iraq War began as a conflict based on myths. In speeches, President George W. Bush would mention the terrorist attack on the twin towers and the danger of the Saddam regime within moments of each other, drawing a line between the figures and events that realistically were only tangentially connected.[17] In order to accept the official rhetoric used by the Bush administration, *Rolling Stone* journalist Matt Taibbi, looking back at the conflict in 2015 stated:

> First you had to accept a fictional implied connection between Saddam Hussein and 9/11. Then you had to buy that this heavily-sanctioned secular dictator (and confirmed enemy of Islamic radicals) would be a likely sponsor of radical Islamic terror. Then after that you had to accept that Saddam even had the capability of supplying terrorists with weapons that could hurt us.[18]

While looking back at the war makes it easy to argue against the series of narratives that one would have to accept to support and

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[16] Dick Cheney quoted in: "Matt Taibbi on the Journalist & Politician Cheerleaders for Iraq War, Then & Now," Democracy Now, accessed March 17, 2018, http://www.democracynow.org/blog/2015/5/21/matt_taibbi_on_the_journalists_politicians.

[17] David Hancock AP October 7, 2002, and 8:43 Pm, "Text Of President Bush's Speech," accessed March 19, 2018, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/text-of-president-bushs-speech-07-10-2002/.

[18] Matt Taibbi, "Forget What We Know Now: We Knew Then Iraq War Was a Joke," Rolling Stone, accessed March 17, 2018, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/forget-what-we-know-now-we-knew-then-the-iraq-war-was-a-joke-20150518.

believe in America's role settling the new frontier, in 2003 the news media aided in pushing this narrative onto the American people. In a study published in *Political Science Quarterly* in the winter of 2003, researchers examined the news sources that subjects consumed alongside whether or not they believed in any of three popular misconceptions of Iraq: That America had evidence of a link between al Qaeda and Iraq, that there was evidence of Iraq holding the infamous weapons of mass destruction, and that America's decision to invade Iraq was seen favourably on a global stage.[19] Each played into the frontier narrative of American exceptionalism being required to civilize Iraq and aid the world globally through democratizing a country that was seen as dangerous to the global citizen. The study found that those who relied on Fox News, CBS or NBC as their main sources of news had the highest chance of believing in at least one or more of the misconceptions regarding the Iraq War.[20] For example, sixty-seven percent of subjects that stated that Fox News was their main source for news also believed that there was a direct link between al Qaeda and Iraq[21] (which may not be too surprising with articles running with headlines such as "Nightmare Scenario: Iraq, Al Qaeda Linked"[22] and graphics that stated "TERROR ALERT HIGH" featured prominently on early Fox coverage of the invasion of Iraq).[23] The study found that most major news sources outside of NPR or PBS still lead to the majority of

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[19] Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay and Evan Lewis, "Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War," *Political Science Quarterly.* 118, no. 4 (2003): 569-598.

[20] Ibid., 582.

[21] Ibid., 583.

[22] "Nightmare Scenario: Iraq, Al Qaeda Linked," Text.Article, Associated Press, January 30, 2003, accessed March 20, 2018, http://www.foxnews.com/story/2003/01/30/nightmare-scenario-iraq-al-qaeda-linked.html.

[23] "The Iraq Invasion Archive-Fox News 1am Update - YouTube," accessed March 21, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfANHUKRbX4.

viewers believing in at least one of the misconceptions. Most major American news sources lead to the acceptance of one of the misconceptions. The marketing of the Iraq War to the American people was successful within the first year of the war.

One of the starkest examples of the moulding of Iraq into a new American frontier was not found strictly in the stories that were told about the war, but the people who told them. A unique element of the Iraq War was the amount of access that the news media had to those who were on the ground. Pentagon-approved outlets were granted access to not only send reporters into Iraq, but to have reporters and production crews placed within combat units. This was in direct response to the complaints by news organizations about lack of access during both the Gulf War and the war in Afghanistan. Approximately 500 reporters would find themselves placed within combat units within the first year of the war, and they would come to be known as 'embedded journalists.'[24] The reporters that were granted this access effectively became the new modern-day Turner equivalent, telling persuasive stories about the hardships of American efforts to instill a democracy overseas. The stories were presented at face value, with little critical engagement on what the ongoing conflict meant for Iraq or the world outside of the unit that was being portrayed, also without acknowledgement of travel paid for by the military creating a cloudy ethical situation.[25] Their role was not to act as a soldier, but instead as a form of sidekick to the unit.[26] This lead to over-exaggeration of the role of the troops, or even the role of the reporter with many adopting themselves as an equal part of the combat unit, adopting language such as "we" or "our" in

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[24] J. D. Froneman and Thalyta Swanepoel, "Embedded Journalism – More than a Conflictreporting Issue," *Communicatio* 30, no. 2 (January 1, 2004), 24-25.

[25] Ibid., 27-28.

[26] Deborah L. Jaramillo, *Ugly War, Pretty Package: How CNN and Fox News Made the Invasion of Iraq High Concept* (Bloomington, UNITED STATES: Indiana University Press, 2009), 126.

reference to the units that they occupied. Reporters could begin to see themselves as what Paul Rutherford referred to in *Weapons of Mass Persuasion: Marketing the War Against Iraq* as being "clearly on a grand adventure."[27] However, this hubris could easily backfire and expose the filter of the great frontier that Iraq was presented through. One of the most notable examples was in the case of NBC anchor Brian Williams falsely recounting a story that put him in a helicopter that had supposedly been hit by ground fire. The flight engineer Lance Reynolds who had ridden with Williams in 2003 had stated that "it felt like a personal experience that someone else wanted to participate in and didn't deserve to participate in."[28] Another example from Fox News plays out in the reporting of Geraldo Rivera who had been expelled from Iraq after being embedded within the 101st Airborne Division. Rivera had drawn a map of the surrounding areas, including the relative location of their location to Baghdad in the sand on television, effectively violating broadcast rules.[29]

Much like the musings on the American frontier by Turner in 1893, reporters stationed with troops almost exclusively featured the stories of Americans on their quest for civilizing the savage lands of Iraq. They showed little interest in detailing the stories of the Iraqi civilians whose lives were under threat during the invasion. For those stories, one would have to look towards outlets that were denied access to Iraqi units by the Pentagon. The CBC was one such unit, denying signing a contract that would require reporters to censor themselves if the Pentagon took issue with the subjects

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[27] Rutherford, *Weapons of Mass Persuasion,* 85.

[28] Lance Reynolds quoted in CBS/AP February 9, 2015, and 3:46 Pm, "Brian Williams Talks about False Iraq War Story," accessed January 24, 2018, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/brian-williams-talks-about-false-iraq-war-story/.

[29] "CNN.Com - Military Kicks Geraldo out of Iraq - Mar. 31, 2003," accessed March 22, 2018, http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/03/31/sprj.irq.geraldo/.

being reported or discussed. Even though the official line of the Pentagon was that outlets could send reporters that did not adhere to a contract, known as 'unilateral reporters', the amount of cooperation that the military had with unilateral reporters was low.[30] This was probably for the best for the Pentagon, as uncensored descriptions of life as both an American Soldier and an Iraqi civilian would shatter the narrative of the 'civilized' helping the 'savage.' The language employed by soldiers when discussing the peoples they were supposedly attempting to liberate involved the common use of phrases such as "haji" (a term that describes ultra-nationalist resistance members fighting the American forces) or even "sand niggers" as blanket terms for Iraqis, whether they were civilian or militant.[31] The exclusion of recordings of the cities or towns that the American military had 'freed' in media reports that had signed the Pentagon contract was also purposeful. Many Iraqi civilians in these towns had an understandable sense of malice towards the foreign troops following the occupation of "shock and awe" that was carried out at the expense of their homes or believed that they were held captive by the American troops, with violence breaking out in the streets because of the disarray.[32]

As with Turner's Frontier Thesis, the portrayal of Iraq and the War on Terror relied was heavily gendered, favouring men for the role of the hero and saviour. In *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, Susan Faludi explores the effects that the War on Terror had on the American outlook on gender roles within society and how women were portrayed in politics and public life post-9/11. "The attack on home soil triggered a search for a guardian

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[30] Rutherford, *Weapons of Mass Persuasion,* 74.

[31] Daniel Egan, "Frantz Fanon and the Construction of the Colonial Subject: Defining 'The Enemy' in the Iraq War," *Socialism and Democracy* 21, no. 3 (November 1, 2007): 142–54, https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300701599858.

[32] Rutherford, *Weapons of Mass Persuasion,* 43-45.

of the homestead, a manly man, to be sure… a frontiersman whose proofs of eligibility were the hatchet and the gun."[33] The image of a rugged American who had dominion over the natural landscape became a common theme after 9/11 and by the 2004 election campaign, presidential candidates began incorporating this image into their campaigns. While George W. Bush was reserved in regard to interviews, he showed favour towards hunting and fishing publications and John Kerry would don hunting gear and a shotgun to campaign under the slogan "John Kerry Will Defend Ohio."[34] The image of the frontiersman and male dominion was as important in political media as it would be in film depicting the Iraq War which will be discussed later.

Now that men were aiming to play their part as the frontiersman in the Frontier Thesis, what was America expecting of women? Women were often relegated to the role of the damsel in distress during the War on Terror both at home and overseas on the frontier. After 9/11, the Bush administration began to work with feminist leaders to call attention to the oppression of women overseas, using the plight of Afghani women as a justification for intervention in Afghanistan. This concern for the rights of women would soon cease to be relevant to both the Bush administration and the American news media once the bombing of Afghanistan began returning the women of Afghanistan to the background of the frontier. Feminist groups were suddenly demonized for both not doing enough to help women overseas and for trying to do too much according to articles published in the National Review, Washington Times and the New York Times.[35]

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[33] Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America,* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 148.

[34] Ibid., 149-151.

[35] Ibid., 39-42.

The co-opting of the stories of women extended to women serving in the military, as was seen in the story of Jessica Lynch, an American soldier who woke up in a Nasiriyah hospital after her company was ambushed in Iraq in 2003 and immediately became a media sensation and a propaganda tool for the American military. A young white girl who needed to be saved from the headquarters of the enemy by the men of the American military was the perfect damsel in distress narrative for a modern cowboy to fulfill. Her harrowing rescue was picked up my major American media outlets, telling stories of American men descending on the hospital by helicopter and infiltrating the hospital to save a scared and injured woman. Lynch was not given the same status that her fellow soldiers received by both the military and outlets such as the Washington Post, Associated Press and others, instead being portrayed as a helpless and scared woman who was at the will of terrorists and according to some sources was being tortured. British journalists from the BBC and British Sky TV on the other hand interviewed staff and visited the hospital that Lynch was rescued from and found an entirely different narrative. Staff that were at the hospital when Lynch was being treated there indicated that the only injuries Lynch has sustained had been from her vehicle crashing during the initial ambush. According to staff, if Lynch had any different treatment in the hospital "it was unusually favorable."[36] Portrayals of women on the frontier played a specific role in the War on Terror, and it was to show Americans how a feminine purity was threatened by 'savage' Afghani and Iraqi men. This purity, found in women on both sides of the war could be liberated by the American soldier, much like Turner wrote of the dominion the American man had over the land they colonized and the freedom they brought to it.

While the news media plays a large role in developing this American frontier, another industry reaps the benefits of frontier narratives while profiting off global audiences. Hollywood films have been

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[36] Ibid., 165-172.

telling the stories of war for ages, detailing both true and crafted narratives of soldiers fighting for American freedom. The Iraq War film however continues the America centred stories from the last wave of popular war films, those that told the story of the Vietnam War (e.g. *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), *The Deer Hunter* (1978)), but is less critical of the effects of war on foreign countries, only critical of what the war does to the American soldier's psyche.[37] Producing a film that was critical of the government and American actions was made difficult due to the political climate of the country after a national disaster and about a war that was linked to the war on terror that had been enflamed after 9/11. Finding networks to pick up an anti-war advertisement campaign that asked the public to wait for the United Nations to carry out their inspections was difficult enough;[38] finding a production studio to funnel millions of dollars into a film that could be perceived as anti-American was understandably much more difficult.

Putting American films made after 2001 into the context of 9/11 is vital to understanding the media landscape in which war films of the twenty-first century were produced. In his keynote address at the San Francisco International Film Festival, director Steven Soderbergh discussed the change in American entertainment habits after 9/11: "I think that what people go to the movies for has changed since 9/11. I still think the country is in some form of PTSD about that event… people are, as a result, looking more toward escapist entertainment."[39] Soderbergh points to 9/11 as the event that lead to fewer studio movies being made per year, as large studios strive to

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[37] Films regarding the Iraq War will often be somewhat critical of the effect of war on the American soldier's psyche but will fail to consider the effects on the same effects on anyone outside of America.

[38] Rutherford, *Weapons of Mass Persuasion,* 43-45

[39] Steven Soderbergh, "Steven Soderbergh's State Of Cinema Talk," *Deadline* (blog), April 30, 2013, accessed January 23, http://deadline.com/2013/04/steven-soderbergh-state-of-cinema-address-486368/.

make the most money through fewer, safer films. This often meant that when a film portrayed 9/11 or the following events that it had started, films would neglect to fill in the context surrounding why these events happen. If one were to gain their understanding of national events and politics strictly through blockbuster films such as *United 93, Jarhead* or *The Hurt Locker*, the Middle East would blend together as a collective identity that uniformly hated America, democracy and freedom.[40] Subtlety can often give way to action, reducing both the Iraqi citizen and the American soldier's experiences of war to continuous frames of violence[41], both diminishing the importance of the person, and the public response to images of violence against the other. America's previous engagements with Middle Eastern powers such as Iran or Iraq, or their support of regimes that they now wish to dismantle have little place on screen, and don't provide the same form of escapist entertainment that Soderbergh was talking about at the SFIFF.

In discussing films regarding the Iraq War, the focus of this study will be three films that earned both critical acclaim as well as nominations from the Academy Awards, each looking at a different facet of the war and the frontier narrative. Beginning with possibly the most widely recognized film regarding the Iraq War (in terms of both critical praise and awards won, including the Academy Award for Best Picture), *The Hurt Locker* (2008)[42] sets out to demonstrate the harsh conditions and the psychological effects that war has on American soldiers. In doing so the film casts to the side the Iraqi civilians that Sergeant William James' (Jeremy Renner) unit is supposed to free and protect. *The Hurt Locker* concerns itself with

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[40] Terence McSweeney, *The "War on Terror" and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 47.
[41] Garrett Stewart, "Digital Fatigue: Imaging War in Recent American Film," *Film Quarterly; Berkeley* 62, no. 4 (Summer 2009): 48-49.
[42] *The Hurt Locker*, directed by Kathryn Bigelow (2008; Santa Monica, CA: Summit Entertainment), DVD.

the portrayal of American soldiers disarming Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) and their lives on duty in Iraq. Throughout the film, the presence of Iraqi characters is mostly relegated to the portrayal of terrorists, enemies and those affected by terrorists. The most humanizing role for an Iraqi finds itself in a youth known simply as Beckham (Christopher Sayegh), a teenager who sells DVDs to the troops. Beckham is later thought to be found dead by James, and with an IED surgically implanted into his corpse, an act that Terrence Mcsweeney notes in *The "War on Terror" and American Film* has never been recorded as being employed by Iraqi insurgents. Therefore, this shows the film's "desire to imagine monstrosities that continue to demonise Iraqi insurgents".[43] The frontier binary lives in *The Hurt Locker*, portraying the American troops as a civilized unit of saviours on a quest to bring freedom to a frontier that is populated with savages. The Iraqi citizens play the role of the savage, not simply playing a role that is metaphorically dangerous, but literally dangerous to the Americans. Any interaction with an Iraqi civilian can and often does become a combat situation, any non-American portrayed in the movie can be a literal bomb ready to kill the civilized settlers.[44]

Moving from the fictional portrayal of an American unit in Iraq in *The Hurt Locker* to a narrative based on the autobiography of American soldier Chris Kyle*, American Sniper* (2014)[45] continues the frontier narrative three years after the formal end of American involvement in Iraq. Critically praised, *American Sniper* was nominated for six Academy Awards, including Best Picture.[46] Focusing on the life of

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[43] McSweeney, *The "War on Terror" and American Film,* 69.

[44] Bigelow, *The Hurt Locker*.

[45] *American Sniper*, directed by Clint Eastwood (2014; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros.), DVD.

[46] "The 87th Academy Awards 2015," Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, accessed March 19, 2018, https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/2015.

Chris Kyle (Bradley Cooper), *American Sniper* portrays Kyle as the modern frontiersman bringing democracy to a frontier through violence. Like *The Hurt Locker*, *American Sniper* prioritizes the American soldier over the brown bodies that he is killing. Iraqi civilians are used as a plot device to convey the danger that Iraq embodies to not only the American soldier, but to the American citizen as well. In a pivotal moment in the film, Kyle witnesses the twin towers falling during the 9/11 attacks, a scene that acts as a precursor to his first tour of Iraq. Through this scene, *American Sniper* solidifies the idea that the events of 9/11 are directly linked to and act as a catalyst for the form of manifest destiny embodied by America engagement in Iraq. This scene effectively draws a direct line between 9/11 and the killing of Iraqi citizens, justifying the violence with the perceived connection between the Hussein regime and the terrorist attacks carried out by Al-Qaida.[47] While both *American Sniper* and *The Hurt Locker* may effectively portray the negative effects that war has on American soldiers, they both fall into a similar trap of films portraying the Vietnam War in that they neglect to look at the effects that American imperialism has on the people they are colonizing. In his review of *American Sniper*, Matt Taibbi points to focus on a single soldier as being "dangerous."[48] Through the portrayal of a single, heroic character, *American Sniper*, like the stories documented by embedded reporters fails to portray a deeper understanding of the reasons for these heroes engaging in shootouts in a foreign country. As Taibbi notes: "Sometimes there's no such thing as 'just a human story.' Sometimes a story is meaningless or worse without real context, and this is one of them."[49]

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[47] *American Sniper*, dir. Clint Eastwood.

[48] Matt Taibbi, "'American Sniper' Is Almost Too Dumb to Criticize," Rolling Stone, accessed March 17, 2018, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/american-sniper-is-almost-too-dumb-to-criticize-20150121.

[49] Ibid.

Popular narratives may even shape the way in which Americans were expected to see and understand the atrocities committed by Americans during the Iraq War. Looking towards Abu Ghraib, where infamous photos depicting torture and humiliation at the hands of Americans were taken, Slavoj Žižek argues that the photos that were the result of these torture sessions reflected more than rogue soldiers torturing supposed terrorists: "To anyone acquainted with the reality of the American way of life, the photos brought to mind the obscene underside of U.S. popular culture."[50] The photos that came out of Abu Ghraib have a similarity to those seen from extreme ritual initiations into fraternities or sports teams that often end up in the hands of the media.[51] Torture of the Other can continue to be justified in American popular culture when looking at a film such as *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), another Academy Award-nominated film from *The Hurt Locker* director Kathryn Bigelow. *Zero Dark Thirty*'s production team believe that the film portrays an honest look at the horrors and controversy of torture as a method of interrogation, but ultimately dehumanizes the tortured subject, leaving them with little agency and portraying torture as a method that ultimately yields good information (the subject being tortured in the film reveals the identity of Osama bin Laden's personal courier).[52]

Through the news media and Hollywood films, a story was told. The American hero, a modern cowboy perhaps, was assaulted on a Tuesday morning in 2001 and went to a foreign and untamed land to find both revenge and to help those who did not know any better. This was the story that has been repeated since the invasion in 2003, but when we look backstage, what did this global stage-play

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[50] Slavoj Žižek, "What Rumsfeld Doesnt Know That He Knows About Abu Ghraib," *In These Times*, May 21, 2004, accessed March 17, 2018, http://inthesetimes.com/article/747/what_rumsfeld_doesn_know_that_he_knows_about_abu_ghraib.

[51] Ibid.

[52] McSweeney, *The "war on Terror" and American Film,* 37-38.

truly look like? After we strip away the cowboys, the frontiers and the savages, what we are left with is the common framework of American Imperialism**.** The American response after 9/11 was not unusual for many South Asian citizens, or for many global citizens. The expansion of American imperialism overseas had been common for a century. Tariq Ali points to the events of the 1953 coup against Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953, the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, the removal of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto from the presidency of Pakistan and the installation of regimes throughout South-East Asia and Japan as some examples of the extent of American Imperialism.[53] The only difference now was that there was a new frontier and a destiny to fulfill after the towers fell in September. This reshaping of a familiar narrative to communicate exceptionalism in the face of adversity draws further parallels to Turner's frontier thesis. Turner shapes familiar methods of European colonization into fairy-tale like characters, implying that what was achieved in western America could only have been achieved by Americans.[54] This borderlands narrative that is crafted on screen ignores the plight of those native to the land being settled upon, the bodies of the Iraqi citizen are only meant to be destroyed or improved by the presence of the exceptional American.

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[53] Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity*, New edition edition (London: Verso, 2003), 292-293.
[54] Rojek, "F.J. Turner's 'Frontier Thesis.'"

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