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Normalizing violence through front-line stories: the case of *American Sniper*

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the present article is to explore the image of the ‘war on terror’ in US popular culture through soldiers’ battlefield experience. The main argument is that the ‘living’ (or ‘embarked’) narration of front lines creates an effect of power that gives the soldier a legitimate authority to take part in the representation of war. As such, the ‘view from the battlefield’ can be conceptualized as a political gesture as it involves the production of shared representations of war. The article focuses on the *American Sniper* legend, which is a heroic narration of the experience in Iraq of a former Navy SEAL, Chris Kyle. I propose to understand the conditions that made possible the collective normalization of a soldier considered ‘the most lethal sniper in the US military history’. The study of this case brings to the fore two main conclusions. First, the political dimension of *American Sniper* paradoxically emerges from an apolitical discourse that claims to tell the ‘real story’ of a soldier on front lines. Second, war appears at the same time as an agonistic struggle for life where killing is the condition for survival and as a banal and trans-historical reality embodied into ‘ordinary’ human emotions.

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Introduction

The US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan justified by the ‘war on terror’ were intensely covered by the American media and rapidly aroused popular fascination in the US public space (Nilges 2010; Jaramillo 2009; Stahl 2010). Among the stories that were told around these two interventions, one is particularly intriguing: the *American Sniper* legend.

The legend stages Chris Kyle (1974–2013) as ‘the most lethal sniper in US military history’. A Navy SEAL sniper deployed four times in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Kyle was accredited officially with 160 ‘confirmed kills’. He proudly estimated the number at 255. Kyle became publicly known after the publication of his bestselling autobiography, *American Sniper* (2012), which sold 1.2 million copies (Lewis 2015). Throughout the book, Kyle describes his military experience in Iraq and confesses his addiction to armed violence. After the publication of his war memoirs, Kyle’s story rapidly gained

notoriety up to the point that he was nicknamed ‘The Legend’. Clint Eastwood produced a film adaptation of Kyle’s autobiography, *American Sniper*, that rapidly became a blockbuster movie. Released in January 2015, *American Sniper* was a big commercial success and represented the most visible element in the construction of Kyle’s legend. Seen by some reviewers as the most important cinematographic event of 2015, the movie reached a record of US\$90.2 million in the opening weekend, and was nominated for six Oscars.

In fact, beyond its overwhelming success, what makes *American Sniper*¹ a particularly intriguing case is the brutalities it contains. Kyle’s story is built on a radically asymmetric violence. In his autobiography, Chris Kyle imagines himself as part of a ‘hunting-sort’ of war, in which a strongly equipped and trained soldier kills from a safe distance an enemy with a low level of protection and unaware of being a target.

This form of violence and the interest it aroused both in the media and among the general public differs from more conventional war situations, such as the Second World War. In the past, soldiers belonging to opposite sides lived the front experience in terrible, but comparable, conditions and confronted each other in a direct and symmetric manner. In fact, sniper soldiers were already a source of fascination in the context of WWII. The Russian Vasili Zaitsev and the Finnish Simo Häyhä were, for instance, known for their resistance to German and Soviet armies, respectively. However, their reputation never reached the level of Chris Kyle’s in terms of media exposure. The best known evidence of Vassili Zaitsev’s story can be found in the movie *Stalingrad* (2001), produced by the French filmmaker Jean-Jacques Annaud 50 years after the end of the war. However, the ‘reasons’ behind wide public admiration are not the same. Contrary to Kyle’s story, Zaitsev and Häyhä were appreciated for their resistance against the forces of an invader state in the terrible circumstances of the Eastern and Northern European battlefields (Doherty and Webb 2013, 33–42). Fascination for snipers is therefore not new, but the reasons behind it have changed over time.

Starting with these introductory remarks, this article’s objective is to question *American Sniper* well beyond the issue of sniper mythologies. Kyle’s legend needs to be analysed starting from the representations of war currently shared in US society: what does the collective normalization of a soldier who portrays himself as a living manhunt imply for the production of shared imageries of war?

My overall argument is that *American Sniper* is not just the story of a soldier but a discourse on war with concrete political effects, as it takes part in the production of war representations. Through this legend, the soldier, as a symbol and an authority, is empowered to speak about war. In this way, Kyle’s legend makes the soldiers’ subjectivity during combat a legitimate space where war representations are fabricated.² The ‘war on terror’, both as a political reality and as a popular culture product, is the context that makes possible this form of subjective empowerment of the soldier.

The starting hypothesis of this article is double:

- The political dimension of *American Sniper* paradoxically emerges from an apolitical discourse that claims to tell the ‘real story’ of a soldier on front lines;
- This paradox produces two violent representations of war: an agonistic struggle for life and a banal reality embodied into ‘ordinary’ human feelings.

The article is organized in four parts. First, in the light of the research question formulated above, I discuss the critical literature that focuses on links among popular culture, emotions and the ‘war on terror’. Academics have largely explored the role of popular culture in the reproduction of identities mobilized by the ‘war on terror’. Less attention is nevertheless given to coverage of the war seen through ‘soldiers’ eyes’. This is why I intend to explore the ways in which the recent media focus on soldiers’ subjectivity is the product of the ‘war on terror’ political ontology. The second part will focus on methodological considerations and will shed light on the conceptualization of *American Sniper* as a collectively created discourse. Third, I analyse the foundations of Kyle’s legend and show that it draws on a glorification of violence. War is framed as an agonistic confrontation where killing is the first survival condition for soldiers. In the final part, I focus on the emotional framing of *American Sniper*, and its effects. I argue that the compassion developed around Chris Kyle’s story banalizes the violence and transforms him into a ‘legendary ordinary human’. Moreover, the emotional turn of Kyle’s legend neutralizes equally the critical judgement on war as a political phenomenon. The apparatus of war appears to be encapsulated into Kyle’s individual experience and reduces in this way the intelligibility of the Iraqi conflict to the emotions of a man.

The soldier as a legitimate subject to speak about war

The visual experience of the battlefield

Kyle’s legend is interestingly readable by contributing to the literature on the role of popular culture in the representations of world politics, and, more specifically, of war. The study of popular culture is a well-developed field in international relations. Interest around this topic emerged from the growing conviction that state elites are only one type of actors who make sense of world politics (Weldes 1999, 118). As Jutta Weldes and Christina Rowley argue, ‘popular culture is especially significant because we are all immersed in these discourses in our daily lives; they constitute our everyday common sense’ (Weldes 2016, 19). As ‘all cultural sites are powerful arenas in which political struggles take place’ (Weber 2005, 188), popular culture and world politics are linked by a co-constitutive relation:

The ongoing and phenomenal growth in the production and circulation of popular culture makes world politics what it currently is. If we understand the investigation of world politics as the ‘philosophical anthropology of everyday life on a global scale’, visual and representational imaginaries are sites where politics and political subjectivity are constituted. (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 157)

Scholars working on the ‘war on terror’ have mainly addressed this co-constitution by emphasizing the reproduction of political identities through the civilizational rhetoric. Indeed, studies have underlined that popular culture re-articulates the messianic distinction between the civilized ‘Self’ (the Western political order) and the barbaric ‘Others’ (the ‘terrorists’) through movies, TV or radio shows, blogs and entertaining books (Birkenstein, Froula, and Randell 2010; Shepherd 2008, 213–26; Dittmer 2005).

A group of scholars have recently criticized this approach by arguing that the emphasis on linguistic structures and the socially constructed dimension of racial or national imaginaries occult the decisive role of emotions in the legitimation of the ‘war on terror’ (Solomon 2012, 911). They remind us that emotions take part in the production of collective identities and ‘work to differentiate between others precisely by identifying those that can be loved, those that can be grieved, that is, by constituting some others as the legitimate objects of emotion. This differentiation is crucial in politics as it works to secure a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate lives’ (Ahmed 2014, 191; see also Butler 2009, 34–6; Ahall 2009, 33–4; Crawford 2014, 549). In this context, it is argued that the ‘war on terror’ finds an important source of legitimacy in media or political discourses on fear and insecurity, as these discourses ‘generate a culture of anxiety and resentment, pitting people against whatever or whoever is perceived to threaten them. Individuals are being mobilized around what seems the only natural response to terrorism: war’ (Bleiker and Hutchison 2008, 60; see also Ahmed 2015, 545–60).

Using the example of *American Sniper*, I would like to focus in what follows on one aspect less addressed in the above-mentioned literature: the war seen through soldiers’ eyes and the signification of these accounts for American popular culture as a shaping site for representations of war. There are at least two reasons why such an approach can be valuable for understanding war discourses. Firstly, it allows us to trace in popular culture the ground sources of potential legitimacy for the ‘war on terror’. While ideologies and Self/Other differentiation have received significant attention from scholars, the aim of the current article is to shed light on the effects of the battlefield universe when reaching important media exposure. Secondly, the literature has already underlined that emotions play a role in the ‘war on terror’ by creating an atmosphere of constant fear. In this context, changing the perspective and exploring how emotions interfere when the spectator is visually exposed to soldiers’ war experiences could be a fertile exercise. But before the empirical analysis of Kyle’s legend, I will focus in the next section on the link between the ‘war on terror’ and the recent publicity around stories of battlefields.

Narrating the ‘war on terror’ from an ‘I’ perspective

The intense publication of military memoirs of US soldiers’ experiences on the Afghan and Iraqi fronts during the last decade has received little attention from scholars. Synne Dyvik’s recent analysis on the Norwegian case is an inspiring invitation to an in-depth exploration of this topic: ‘Military memoirs should be read as constituent components in “processes of identity production”, meaning that when analysing them we should insist ‘on the discursive nature of “experience” and on the politics of its construction’ (Dyvik 2016, 136). The systematic exploration by Rachel Woodward and Neil Jenkins of memoirs published by British soldiers operating in Afghanistan (Helmand between 2006 and 2012) is useful to understand the way militaries articulate and reproduce certain ‘geopolitical imageries’ (Woodward and Jenkins 2012, 495–508).³

The success of Kyle’s story was also made possible by the wider public interest in testimonies of battlefield experiences. This wider interest partly explains why someone who confesses the pleasure he had in killing hundreds of persons can be seen as a legend.

The ambition of battlefield stories is to offer an ‘objective’ view of what a concrete war experience really is (Stone 2015; Maurer 2012; Meyer 2013; Bradley 2011).⁴

Some stories are famous, such as Marcus Luttrell’s. In his autobiography *Lone Survivor: The Eyewitness Account of Operation Red Wings and the Lost Heroes of SEAL Team 10* (2007), the former Navy SEAL explains how he survived an ambush in which he was taken together with his three comrades in Afghanistan. The book was on the top title list of *The New York Times* Non-Fiction Best Sellers for three weeks. The film producer Peter Berg adapted Luttrell’s story to cinema (*Lone Survivor*, 2013). The movie generated more than US\$154.8 million at the box office and \$38.5 million in the first weekend of its release.

Cinema is an important vehicle for rendering visible soldiers’ experience in Iraq and Afghanistan (e.g. *Hurt Locker* (2008) by Kathryn Bigelow; *The Ground Truth* by Patricia Fulkrod (2006) or *Restrepo* by Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger (2010)). At the same time, web platforms such as YouTube or Dailymotion are directly used by soldiers to broadcast videos of their combats. Online channels have been explicitly created for that purpose (Funkers350, War clashes or US Military Photos & Videos). Kevin McSorley sees in those videos the emergence of a ‘somatic’ legitimacy of war:

Rather than an abstracted view from above, this footage offers a boots-on-the-ground sensory immersion: into the rhythmic kinaesthetics of patrolling through the unforgiving landscape of Afghanistan; into the domestic routines of mundane embodied life on base; and into the breathless, visceral dramas and bodily risks of ‘contact’. (McSorley 2012a, 48)

Thus, *American Sniper* is just one of the most visible examples of a societal phenomenon that developed around US wars as human experiences. The emergence of this narration indicates widespread interest in a certain way of telling the war, but it reveals very little about the main referent of Kyle’s story: the violence of the main protagonist. In this context, imagining war as an experience implies imagining violence as an experience (McSorley 2013; Sylvester 2012, 483–503). The intention of showing what war *really* is can be understood as a story about how violent war *really* is:

In the pages to come, I will apply my officer’s insight and battlefield experience [...] to ten pressing issues raised by America’s new era at war. What makes a hero. How to be brave. The right and the wrong ways to kill. (Denver 2016, 8)

American Sniper is to be placed in the representations of war and its violence that currently dominate the US public space. The ‘war on terror’ is the context that makes possible the emergence of the imagery war as a violent living experience.

The ‘war on terror’, which was the answer to the 9/11 attacks, does not have its origins in the classical realm of war and violence as a ‘means’ for achieving political goals (Clausewitz 2007, 31–2) against an enemy clearly defined and seen as politically rational (Schmitt 1996, 48–9). The ‘war on terror’ is a war against a form of violence (the so-called ‘terror’); its political ontology is fused with violence, and, therefore, the definition of the enemy is violence in itself. The direct consequence is that war exists for its own indefinite violence (Newman and Levine 2006, 23–49; Jackson 2008, 190, 2005, 4; Gregory 2004, 49–56).

The ‘war on terror’ therefore makes possible the public prominence of a specific figure: the ‘warrior’. As François Debrix argues, violence being the key enemy and the

image of the human being completely fused with war, the ‘warrior’ is one of the political centres of gravity of the ‘war on terror’:

The warriors are now in charge. Their mission is to destroy as many sources of ‘evil’ and terror as possible, be they terrorists, states harbouring terrorists, states said to be sponsoring terrorists, or any other group or state whose potentiality for ‘evil’ has yet to be manifested. [...] It would be up to American warriors, those newly envisioned moral crusaders, to ‘keep military strengths beyond challenge’ (Bush quoted in Kaplan and Krystol 2003, 74). It would be their job to ‘concentrate America’s military power to devastating effect’ (Kaplan and Krystol 2003, 72). (Debrix 2008, 112–3)

Violence (as an indefinite end) becoming the dominant representation of the ‘war on terror’ feeds a growing societal need to (visually) identify or imagine the main actors who deploy the necessary violence to the fight against ‘terror’. *American Sniper* and the numerous personal accounts of the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan can be analysed as parts of this phenomenon. Through their stories, the ‘warrior’ is visible to the society. In this way, he becomes one of the sites where the co-constitution between the ‘war on terror’ as a political-military project and as an everyday visual/sensorial reality is played out. Soldiers are among the legitimate actors for speaking *truly* about war: warriors’ wars are universal experiences that tell the *War*, because they live it. The lethal nature of Chris Kyle’s experience makes him the perfect incarnation of the warriors necessary for the existence of the ‘war on terror’. *American Sniper* is understandable as a process that politically empowers the subjectivity of the soldier in his capacity to legitimately represent the war he wages. This can partially explain why a sniper describing himself as a man hunter is seen as a ‘legend’.

The very frequent use of the term ‘legend’ with reference to *American Sniper* is not hazardous. The reference to the idea of a ‘legend’ can be understood in two different ways, both of them reflecting the empowerment of the soldier. First, a ‘legend’ is a half-real, half-fiction narration, constructed around the hypothetical existence of facts and/or persons. A legendary account is made possible by the shared intention of discovering (or at least questioning) the ‘real’ nature of its components. In this sense, the legendary status of *American Sniper* has a close link to the societal trend described above of uncovering the reality of the ‘battlefield’, seen as a space usually unfamiliar to the daily life at home but shrouded in spectacular and publicly visible narratives. Secondly, describing someone as a ‘legend’ indicates the extent to which one individual story can stimulate the production of collective representations. The legendary status of Chris Kyle feeds the belief of the universal nature of soldiers’ experiences on front line. In this way, the soldier’s capacity to legitimately speak about war is reinforced.

In this context, through the analysis of Kyle’s legend, the present research aims to contribute in two ways to the literature that examines the link between popular culture, emotions and the ‘war on terror’.

I firstly intend to show that the shift to seeing soldiers’ subjectivity as a site of authority in the context of the ‘war on terror’ nourishes a discourse on war exclusively related to violence. War is ‘liberated’ from its rational realm.⁵ The firefights, cries, blood, injuries, and death that currently structure the popular culture imaginary of the experience of battles feed a legitimate image of war as an agonistic struggle for life.

The second contribution aimed at by the present article is to question the link between the first-person representation of war and the debate on emotions, and the ‘war on terror’. Front-line stories showing the day-to-day atmosphere of combats, the physical threats or psychological pressures, can provoke empathy and compassion towards US soldiers. Yet these feelings are not totally detached from politics. Emotions take part in the production of identities by defining who is a legitimate subject for compassion (Welland 2015, 116). The political effect of emotions becomes decisive when the spectator is dived into soldiers’ experience. In the case of the ‘war on terror’, this process is amplified as its narratives are focused on the soldier as a human subject. Through the analysis of the emotional foundations of *American Sniper*, I argue that the compassion for the soldier (Chris Kyle) tends to neutralize critical judgement on war as a political phenomenon. The filtration of war through soldiers’ feelings leads to a process of humanization that reduces the entire apparatus of war to the ‘ordinary’ character and the good intentions of the soldier. As such, emotions do not open the road to a critical understanding of war only because they feed collective fear (as the literature on emotions rightly explains), but also because emotions anchors war in the banality of human feelings.

Seen in this light, the *American Sniper* case can shed light on the paradox characterizing the empowerment of the ‘warriors’ as credible authorities to speak about war. A discourse apparently presented as non-political and telling the pure (coercive and emotional) reality of war is above all a political act that promotes an extremely violent and banalized conception of war. The next section explains the methodological approach used in this article.

Methodological considerations: *American Sniper* as a discourse

For the purposes of the research I will use three types of empirical data about Chris Kyle. I firstly analyse Chris Kyle’s written productions, the most important one being his memoirs. I equally examine Kyle’s public appearances on talk shows or on the radio during which he shared his experience in Iraq. Finally, I analyse third persons’ versions of Kyle’s story. I pay a particular attention, for instance, to Chris Kyle’s wife’s view of her husband’s accomplishments, as well as to the movie *American Sniper*, and to journalists’ books on Kyle. All of the collected data show the high public visibility Kyle’s legend has acquired, the clearest example being the Eastwood movie.

The analysis of the above-mentioned empirical data indicated rapidly that Kyle’s legend is not an isolated phenomenon. Chris Kyle represents only one of the aspects of the discourse around his story. The legend emerged from a network of concepts and sites of discourse production that Kyle cannot entirely shape, but to which the construction of his story is connected. This is why in the understanding of this case it is particularly important to take into account the larger issue of ‘war on terror’ representations and their links to popular culture. I am aware that Chris Kyle’s story has been the object of some criticism. His heroic image is, of course, not unanimously shared because, first, he is occasionally perceived as a ‘hate-filled killer’ (West 2015). Also, the falsity of certain facts has been recently discovered. It has for instance been proved that the former Navy SEAL never earned a second Silver Star (Larter 2016). Nevertheless, the normalization I am interested in is strongly visible and considers Kyle’s story a real

and admirable one. This is why this process is important to analyse, as it produces certain legitimacies of western wars in spite of the dubious nature of the reported facts.

In the light of the above observations, I propose to conceptualize *American Sniper* as a discourse. To take Michel Foucault's definition, discourse is a 'system[s] of dispersion between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, which form a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations)' (Foucault 2002, 41). A discourse does not belong to anyone but is collectively shaped. It is a coherent dispersion of a multitude of objects and concepts that interact following regular and tangible connexions.

The empirical material rapidly indicated that the discourse around *American Sniper* developed around four main objects. These four objects are the most recurrent and structuring components of Kyle's legend:

- 'War violence' (referring to Kyle's killings);
- 'Weapons and military technical details' (referring to the military material and fighting techniques Kyle used in the combat in Iraq);
- The 'enemy' (referring to the representation of the enemy against which Kyle fought in Iraq);
- 'Family' (referring to Kyle's private and intimate sphere).

The network of objects composing *American Sniper* is built upon two co-existing representational tracks. The first one is an explicit glorification of violence. 'War violence' is discursively central. The other objects systematically serve its emphasis. The second track is emotional: human emotions are the perspective through which Kyle's history is framed. 'War violence' is still central, but it emotionally enhances the visibility of the other objects. In this way, Kyle becomes the human embodiment of objects composing his legend. They penetrate Kyle so intensively that they symbolize the everyday expression of his own feelings, emotions and thoughts. This is where I consider that the emotional banalization of violence inherent to *American Sniper* can be placed.

The two following sections respectively deal with these two representational tracks and their concrete effects in the conception of war.

War as an agonistic struggle for life: *American Sniper* and the glorification of violence

Weapons and techno-military details: violence as techno-fetishism

The first object through which *American Sniper* proves to be a glorification of violence are the weapons and operational details. Their framing reveals the existence of a techno-fetishism that leads to a specific exaltation of violence. The first link established with violence concerns the pleasure Kyle took in using different types of weapons for fighting insurgents:

When you're in a profession where your job is to kill people, you start getting creative about doing it. You think about getting the most firepower you possibly can into battle. And you start to think of new and inventive ways to eliminate your enemy. We had so many targets out in Viet Ram [the nickname they give to Ramadi city] we started

asking ourselves, what weapons have we not used to kill them? No pistol kill yet? You have to get at least one. We'd use different weapons for the experience, to learn the weapon's capabilities in combat. But at times it was a game [...]. We loved it. (Kyle 2013a, 271–3)

Techno-military details highlight the violence by transforming the 'enemy' into quantitative data and technical 'targets'. Kyle speaks about 'pop shots' when describing a situation of a 'steady stream of opportunity' for shooting insurgents (Kyle 2013a, 300). He qualifies a battlefield zone with a high number of insurgents as a 'target rich environment'. Kyle develops a similar perspective when he evokes the combat in Sadr city: 'I got to the point that where I had so many kills that I stepped back to let the other guys have a few. I started giving them the best spots in the buildings we took over. Even so, I had a plenty of chances to shoot' (2013a, 389–90). Techno-fetishism is even more obvious when Kyle tells how his overtaking of 100 kills happened in 'a competition between myself and some of the other snipers [...] to see who got the most kills' (2013a, 302). He describes in a similar way his 'longest confirmed kill in Iraq':

[...] 1600 yards was so far away that my scope wouldn't even dial up the shooting resolution. So I did a little mental calculation and adjusted my aim with the help of tree [...]. I took the shot. The moon, Earth and stars aligned. God blew on the bullet, and I gut-shot the jackass. (2013a, 204–5)

A media fascination with military details developed around what was framed as Kyle's 'technical sniper performances'. The quantification of the 'killed enemies' has a big role in this. The number '160 kills' is a central reference, a glorified quantity, to the point that all of Kyle's interviews or books published on him mention the figure to highlight his 'legendary' status. The former Navy SEAL is often compared with Carlos Hathcock, a sniper Marine deployed in Vietnam, who 'owned' the 'former kill record [...] with ninety-three confirmed deaths' (Swofford 2013, 336; Mooney 2013, 131; Harrison 2015).

More interestingly, the use of weapons is also a topic for satiric humour that transforms the act of killing into an intriguing and fascinating reality. This is especially the case during the interview of Kyle on the popular TV talk show *Conan* on TBS, hosted by Conan O'Brien:

CO'B – But I mean, this is something where you're in battle and the technology behind it first of all, the weapons themselves are incredible but there are a lot of calculating wind, there are actually computers involved...

CK – Oh there are! [...] I used a ballistic computer that tells me everything to do so I'm just a monkey on the gun (*smiling*)

CO'B – Ok... I wouldn't go that far but... (*laughs*). (Conan 2012)

The paroxysm of this discursive phenomenon is reached in a special report by the journalist Doug Dunbar on *CBS 11 News*, a Texas TV news programme. The journalist showed to the camera the training target at which he and Kyle shot with a sniper rifle in a gun range. He gives some technical details about their shooting session (specifically the proximity of Kyle's impacts on the target) to prove to the TV spectator 'how serious kind of shooter he is' (CBSDFW 2012; see also Fox 4 News 2012). Doug Dunbar's report and the materiality of the training target full of bullet impacts reconstitute from a technical perspective Kyle's capacity to kill.

The techno-fetishism present in Kyle's legend correlates with the celebration of war as a pure moment of violence and not as a limited confrontation: war means killing, and weapons are the tools that assure an unlimited number of eliminations. *American Sniper's* techno-fetishism serves the act of killing which is seen as the final objective and main purpose of war.

The enemy: 'annihilating' the 'fanatics'

American Sniper does not exclusively transcribe enemies and insurgents through techno-military details, but also does so through violent ideological terms. Two elements define the image Kyle has of the insurgent enemy. The first is the qualification of enemies as 'bad guys'. This notion crystallizes an absolute agonistic vision of war, as it is closely related to extermination rhetoric: 'We lit up the rest of the insurgents, killing them all' (Kyle 2013a, 284); 'When the bad guys were hiding, we tried to dare them into showing themselves so we could take them down. [...] We were just slaughtering them' (2013a, 309–10); 'Everyone I shot was evil. I had good cause on every shot. They all deserved to die' (2013a, 167). Writing again about the Sadr City battle, Kyle explains that his platoon fought 'until all the local bad guys were dead, or at least until they understood that attacking us was not very smart. It was surprising how many idiots you had to kill before they finally got that point' (2013a, 395).

The second category of representation of the enemy that reveals Kyle's relation of violence can be qualified as a 'military orientalism'. Drawing on Edward Said's work on *Orientalism* (Said 1978), Patrick Porter defines 'military orientalism' as 'Westerner [...] representations about the Orient at war' (Porter 2009, 23). These bellicose imaginaries concretize in an exotic and simplistic portrait of the 'oriental enemy', its ideal type being archaic, irrationally violent, religiously mystic and fanatic (Porter 2009; Barkawi and Stanski 2012). In the same way, Kyle draws a simple and orientalist portrait of enemies. He considers them 'fanatics', 'savages'. He assumes that their radical and bellicose religious beliefs are the reason why they want to kill American soldiers (Kyle 2013a, 98, 136, 277, 285, 323). Kyle also suspects them of taking drugs to stimulate their religious aggressiveness during combat (2013a, 168). As a consequence, Kyle develops an agonistic perspective on this mystified oriental enemy. Interrogated by his Army colonel when he was suspected of an illegal shot, he gave the following answer: 'I don't shoot people with Korans – I'd like to but I don't' (Kyle 2013a, 227).

The radical representation of enmity is also produced through systematic references to a 'protecting' rhetoric. Kyle's violence appears as a necessary protection against a military threatening enemy. Kyle was invited to John Bachman's *Newsmax TV American Heroes* magazine on NewsMax TV. The show presents 'chronicles of ordinary Americans who are thrust into extraordinary circumstances and reveal the bright side of human nature' (Hoffman 2013). While the journalist asked Kyle how he felt when he was in situations where he had to 'pull the trigger' during a sniper shot, he answered:

You're not trying to humanize that person, you're not thinking about them or their family or anything else. When I was in those situations, the only thing I'm thinking is trying to stop them from their act of violence they were trying to commit on my guys, the allies [...]. (NewsMax TV 2012)

As this interview shows, the enemy is not seen through his rationality, but as a flow of violence that is detached from his human dimension. Therefore, the only way to resist in this struggle for survival is to accept the violent fatality of war, and therefore to kill. This perspective is particularly obvious during Chris Kyle's interview on the sensational *O'Reilly Factor* TV talk show on Fox News. When Bill O'Reilly asks Kyle if civilians know what war is about, he answers: 'War is hell. Hollywood fantasizes it, makes it look good, but war sucks. [...] You have to get into the mentality and you have to think of them [enemies] not as human being[s]. You have to portray them as savages definitely' (The O'Reilly Factor 2012). The enemy is seen as immanently violent. He is no more than the incarnation of violence. Therefore, the only way to resist or defeat the enemy is to eliminate him. This is also the reason given by Kyle to explain why his platoon members called themselves 'the Punishers':

We called ourselves the Punishers. [...] The Punisher debuted in a Marvel comic book series in the 1970s. He's a real bad-ass who rights wrongs, delivering vigilante justice. A movie by the same name had just come out; the Punisher wore a shirt with a stylized white skull. [...] We all thought what the Punisher did was cool: He righted wrongs. He killed bad guys. He made wrongdoers fear him. That's what we were all about. So we adapted his symbol – a skull – and made it our own, with some modifications. We spray-painted it on our Hummers and body armor, and our helmets and all our guns. And we spray-painted it on every building or wall we could. We wanted people to know, We're here and we want to fuck with you. It was our version of psyops. You see us? We're the people kicking your ass. Fear us. Because we will kill you, motherfucker. You are bad. We are badder. We are bad-ass. (Kyle 2013a, 263, 419)

Kyle's family: importing war at home

The third object that makes visible the violence implied by Kyle's legend is the 'family', referring to Kyle's private and intimate sphere. The link between family and violence lies in the tensions between Kyle's deployments in Iraq and his family obligations as both a husband and a father. In Kyle's words, this war/family tension has nothing to do with a human story dealing with familial sufferings caused by absence or distance. On the contrary, family serves, for Kyle, to affirm his addiction to the violence of war. When Kyle came back from his second deployment, his wife got pregnant with their second child. He explains:

My father told Taya that he was sure once I saw my son and spent time with him, I wouldn't want to reenlist or go back to war. But while we talked a lot about it, in the end I didn't feel there was much of a question about what to do. I was a SEAL. I was trained for war. I was made for it. My country was at war and it needed me. And I missed it. I missed the excitement and the thrill. I loved killing bad guys. (Kyle 2013a, 250–1)

The link between Kyle's family and the object of 'war violence' is also constructed through the 'importation' of Kyle's war behaviour into his private sphere. For instance, he describes his reaction when he believed that a burglar came in his house in the following way:

I've had more fun with burglar alarms than I can recount. One day I woke up after Taya had left for work. As soon as I got out of bed, the alarm went off [...]:
'Intruder alert! Intruder alert in the house! Intruder alert!'

I grabbed my pistol and went to confront the criminal. No son of a bitch was breaking into my house and living to tell about it.

'Intruder: living room!'

I carefully proceeded to the living room and used all my SEAL skills to clear the living room.

Vacant. Smart criminal.

I moved down the hall.

'Intruder: kitchen!'

The kitchen was also clear. The son of a bitch was running from me.

'Intruder: hall'

Motherfucker!

I can't tell you how long it took before I realized I was the intruder: the system was tracking me. (2013a, 108)

American Sniper reveals similarly the influence of war on Kyle's personality and on his relations with his family members. The aggressiveness of his 'war personality' is diluted in banal interactions with his wife and children. He indeed aims to appear as a tough person and is concerned with preserving the image of a masculine family chief (2013a, 223–4). After describing a 'sentimental' conversation with his wife, he concludes: 'I know: it sounds corny as shit. A fucking SEAL talking about love?' (2013a, 368).

Interestingly, violence is also celebrated through the idea of 'family sacrifices'. War is described as a sacrifice of family life, Kyle having even said that he wrote the autobiography for 'getting out not the sacrifices the military members make, but the sacrifices their families have to go through, the single-mothers raising their children and doing other day to day house chores' (Time Magazine 2011; Kera radio 2012). It describes Kyle's familial situation by an implicit reference to violence that is framed as a heroic familial sacrificial choice. During Kyle's appearance on *CBS 11 News*, the interview scenery is very illustrative: while Chris Kyle holds his wife with one of his arms, the conversation between them and the journalist about their family life is sited in front of the training targets Kyle and the journalist shot at. The universes of war and family merge through the visual superposition of the Kyle couple and the reconstituted symbol of the former Navy SEAL's lethal precision. Whether through the importation of combat behaviour at home or the topics of addiction and sacrifices, war appears as an absolute experience as it goes through the more intimate parts of Kyle's life. War is not confined to Iraq battlefields, being both an object of frustration when Kyle is far from its violence and an integral aspect of his personality or private relations. Again, war is liberated from all ethical or political constraints: it is a violent environment full of hatred.

While the aim of this section was to show that *American Sniper* consists in a glorification of violence, the next one deals with the second main representational track of the discourse analysed: its emotional framing.

The banality of violence: *American Sniper* as the story of a 'legendary ordinary human'

'In the memory of Chris Kyle': the close link between weapons and emotions

Weapons are simultaneously anchored in an emotional transcript, in particular after Kyle's death. The first event that fused weapons with an emotional framing of *American*

Sniper is Kyle's funeral. After he was killed in February 2013 in Erath County (Texas) by an American Iraq war veteran, the funeral was organized in the Cowboys Stadium of Arlington (Texas) where hundreds of people gathered for the event. The presence of his sniper rifle situated at the Christian cross is particularly significant (SniperCompany LLC. 2013). The materiality of the gun is emotionally mystified through funeral rituals. Funeral rituals in contemporary western societies are social constructions that serve to apprehend the cultural anxiety of death (DeSpelder and Strickland 1996, 586). As such, funeral rituals are composed of two beliefs that frame the way social agents deal with the life and death of human subjectivities: the mortal condition of human beings and their bodies (the foundation of this anxiety), and the immortal presence of the deceased's memories that reintroduce the 'normal' and 'comforting' flow of life. Funeral rituals celebrate both the mortal and the immortal presence of the deceased's memory. The tomb and the objects with which the deceased person is buried are materialities that symbolize these mortal and immortal cultural beliefs: they are what the dead was and what represents the immortality of his memory (Javeau 2003, 72; Kearl 1989, 49–58). From this perspective, Kyle's sniper rifle is the symbol of the hero's mortal and immortal subjectivity. The sniper rifle was so co-substantial to Kyle's life that its materiality is fused with his mortal past and his immortal memorial future. This weapon symbolizes the human mortality of Kyle's subjectivity in the sense that it represents the end of a legendary life in which the gun was a central component. The weapon symbolizes the immortality of Kyle's subjectivity, as it will immortally recall Kyle's legendary life. The presence of the sniper rifle on the tomb is a powerful transformation of gun materiality into a mystified symbol eternally recalling the human and mortal life of Kyle.

The emotional framing of weapons can also be found in the description of Kyle's close relation with guns. His past indicates that firearms were an integral part of Kyle's childhood and adult life. In *American Gun: A History of the US in Ten Firearms*, Chris Kyle's book that his wife finished writing after his death, Taya Kyle writes:

Like many young boys, Chris first developed his sense of justice playing in the outdoors. He and his brother, Jeff, would take sticks and pretend they were fighting imaginary bad guys in the creek bed behind their house. They loved to copy the heroes they saw in the old Western shows and John Wayne movies. Those early battles nurtured a strong desire to protect others from evil and to fight for what was right. [...] He learned to respect firearms as tools that could bring as much harm as good. [...] He developed an appreciation for the gun as a means of providing for the family while exploring the peaceful essence of nature. (Taya Kyle in Kyle 2013b, ix)

More spectacular is the tribute paid to Kyle during the 2013 National Rifle Association annual meeting. At the beginning of the event, a picture video of Kyle's life is shown and makes an explicit link between Kyle, his family life and guns. On one picture was written: 'Taught by his father to shoot at just 8 years old' (NRA 2013).

Weapons are in this way fused with Kyle's personality, making him a human whose goodness has been shaped by guns. Violence is implicit, because weapons are not linked to an explicit violence, or to 'war performances', but to human emotions. Violence is nevertheless still present, as weapons are used to wage violence. Violence is hidden by an emotional framing that makes weapons a component of immortalized human qualities.

Humanizing enmity

Enmity is also the object of an emotional framing. First, Kyle is the incarnation of the protection against enemies of his 'SEAL brothers'. In this representational track, enemies are not defined as immediate threats, but are anchored in Kyle's own bravery at combat and his personal devotion to military men under fire:

[...] Chris was famous before the book came out. Granted, it was on a much smaller and different scale. He was already a legend in the SEAL community, known as the guy who had killed well over 150 enemy combatants with precision marksmanship. Soldiers and Marines who'd been in Ramadi and some of the other hellholes where he'd done his jobs knew Chris as the 'man on the rooftop' who saved their lives [...]. (DeFelice in Kyle 2013b, 5)

Second, apart from the spectacular battle scenes, Bradley Cooper (playing Kyle) in Eastwood's film is systematically filmed in the privacy of his sniper shots. Cameras make tight close-ups on Cooper's face during sniping scenes. As such, the film pretends to penetrate into the subjective intimacy of Kyle's killing moments and capture his human reactions. This intimate way of telling Kyle's kills constructs a humanized representation in two main ways. The first consists in focusing on the mechanical nature of Kyle's sniping precision. Cooper is nevertheless not staged as a killing machine, but as a human confronted with a war environment. In those scenes, Cooper is filmed in dirty places, having in his scope devastated building and streets. When he is in sniping position, Cooper sometimes puts his bearded head down to ease his neck after long hours spent detecting potential enemies. Moreover, when he shoots, the enemies killed are always vaguely represented. Their faces can rarely be seen; they appear as just living bodies involved in violent actions. Secondly, Cooper is traumatized by some shots he has made. This is particularly the case when he has in his scope a child picking up a rocket launcher. While his face fills with a strong emotion, he says to himself 'Don't pick it up'. Just after the child suddenly drops the weapon, Cooper coughs with a traumatized appearance because of the pressure he felt in the moment. As such, this scene does not represent Kyle as a killing machine that systematically shoots threatening enemies, but as a human who is able to humanize his enemy. It symbolizes Kyle's ability to preserve 'normal' human feelings in the horrific context of war.

As this analysis suggests, the emotional framing of fighting enemies makes Kyle more human, as he is shown in the intimacy of battle. While the enemy portrayal crystallizes violent representations of Kyle and of those who fight him, it is also a way to highlight the human emotions of a soldier. The image of enemies is not about Kyle's use of violence against them, but about what he feels when he is confronted with enemies. The enemy serves to emphasize Kyle's human emotions and reactions.

Chris Kyle, the 'extraordinary family man'

To finish the present investigation of *American Sniper*, a first interesting mechanism can be mentioned in the emotional framing of Kyle's family: his reintegration into a 'common' civilian life after having quit the Navy. His reintegration is anchored in a family rhetoric, Kyle explaining that he is no longer a military killer, but a civilian, a

loving husband and father. Kyle's bloody military past is dissolved in his non-aggressive and 'loving' present. The focus on Kyle's historical present makes his current family life as important a constitutive episode as his past experience in Iraq. This reconstruction of his historical identity by the reading of his past through his present makes Kyle a family member before being a bloody warrior:

Once you kill someone your innocence is gone. And I'm not saying I'm completely innocent now, I will definitely come back to the person I used to be but I get more of this innocence back all the time, the more time I spend around with my family, the more I feel normal again. (Kera radio 2012)

The second emotional transcription of the familial sphere is the anchoring of the 'sacrifice' theme that I identified above into human narratives. From that perspective, Clint Eastwood's film is significant, as the producer said in an interview on *Today's Stars*, a people programme on NBC News: 'It was not just a war movie. [...] This is mostly about the dilemma of leaving family and then where do you go from here' (NBC News 2014). Indeed, the core plot of the film is Kyle's familial sacrifice and the tension he faced when he was deployed in Iraq. The movie deals with this dimension from a subjective perspective by systematically evoking the evolution of Kyle's personality and relationship with his wife (played by Sienna Miller). Interestingly, family tensions inherent to Kyle's four deployments are framed into the transformational impact of war on human subjectivities. The film stages the complexity of Kyle's personal transformation. While at the beginning of the movie Kyle is presented as a loving husband and father, his successive experiences in Iraq progressively generate conflicts between his human feelings and the dehumanization process inherent to war. Kyle's subjective transformation is not presented as a mechanical change that would transform him into a dehumanized war soldier. He is portrayed as the victim of a conflict between his human nature and the dehumanized dynamics to which he is submitted. His human nature is not defeated but in constant combat against a dehumanization process.

Taya Kyle was often invited to press conferences and movie projections with Clint Eastwood and the actors of the film. Kyle's legend is captured in the Hollywood universe, making his familial history an even more fascinating and attractive one.

From that perspective, the validation of *American Sniper* as a familial story is equally reflected in the launch of the Chris Kyle Frog Foundation, initiated by Taya Kyle. The association is 'a non-profit dedicated to serving military and their first responder families. Our goal is to provide experiences helping families reconnect after deployments, military involvement, and time spent serving those in crisis here at home' (Chris Kyle Frog Foundation 2014). The foundation is supported through the selling of 'The Legend' official merchandise'. Anyone interested can buy on the website t-shirts, caps, and pullovers marked with the *Punisher* logo. The symbol that represents a violent military ritual is transformed into a marketable object whose purchase symbolizes Kyle's personal sense of family.

The third mechanism that moves family on an emotional terrain is the praise of Kyle as an exemplary family man. In that sense, Taya Kyle systematically portrays Chris Kyle

as the archetype of the perfect husband and father. As she said, crying, in her funeral speech:

Chris and I fell in love quickly. He was like a kid in a candy store and jumped into loving me with both feet and no looking back. It made me feel like pure gold, because I thought he was the most uniquely idealistic, fun, loving, intelligent, intuitive and sensitive man I had ever met. [...]. Kids [...] he loved you beyond measure. (Taya Kyle at Chris Kyle's funeral ceremony 2013 – CBS 11 News 2013; Fox News 2014; see also the photos and testimonies of Kyle's friend and family members in the memorial edition of his memoirs: Kyle 2013c)

This analysis of the family object suggests that Kyle's legend is emotionalized, to the point of portraying Kyle not only as a military legend but also as a 'legendary everyday family man'. Violence seems far away in this emotional framing of the familial object, but it does not disappear. Indeed, reinforcing Kyle's identity as a loving family man before being a warrior implies that violence is the basic point from which this humanizing portrait is built: violence is banally encapsulated in the 'normal' feelings of a man who experienced the terrible environment of war.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to analyse the implications of *American Sniper* in the representation of war. I intended to do so through a discussion of the literature that deals with popular culture, emotions, and the 'war on terror'. My contribution consisted in connecting the arguments previously made in those studies to the investigation of war as seen from soldiers' eyes. I argued that *American Sniper* is a discourse embodied with political effects. The recent visibility of battlefield narrations as a result of the 'war on terror' political morphology is a process of empowerment through which the soldier (or the 'warrior') is invested with an authority to legitimately speak about war. My argument was therefore twofold.

First, *American Sniper* encourages an apologetic violent representation of war as an agonistic struggle for life. Secondly, Kyle's legend makes war a banal reality. The social, political and organizational machinery of war is reduced to one man's emotions. While this discourse can appear critical (as we visually witness the brutality of war), it paradoxically neutralizes any critical sense as it de-contextualizes the violence of war. Human intelligibility is separated from the deepest war issues because of its cloistering in the good intentions of the man at combat. This emotional compartmentalization of war works as a transformational filter, which metamorphoses a warrior into an ordinary human being. In the *American Sniper* legend, the reversal is intense. Kyle is a legend because he is like any other man, or, more precisely, because he killed like any other man – that is, in a 'human' way. Killing with emotions appears a sufficient condition to benefit from the aura of the human condition.

This article fundamentally suggests that an apparently apolitical narration that 'modestly' pretends to transcribe the reality of war is at least a political discourse that encourages under specific forms the continuity of western interventions.

Beyond the topic of popular culture, *American Sniper* can also be a relevant case for researchers interested in critical military studies. This case can be, for example, an

interesting entry point for studying the militarization of contemporary Western societies. While the direct effects of wars have drastically decreased in Western societies since the major conflicts of the twentieth century (such as bombings, armed fighting, and privations), *American Sniper* shows that the militarization of civil spheres takes place through new types of channels. Individualism is one of them, as Kyle's legend is built around one man's capacity to embody and overcome war logics. In this context, *American Sniper* could be a starting point for questioning the link between the (in)security of the individual as promoted in the Western 'risk societies' (Beck 1992, 100 and 136) and the late-modern possibilities of war. Maximizing the individualist dimension of (in)security through risk and war discourses could partly explain the unending and unsolvable dimension of the wars that Western apparatus have waged over the last two decades.

It is, finally, interesting to place *American Sniper* into the temporal and spatial aspects of war. Given that Kyle's legend reduces the war to violence and emotions, it equally operates as an emancipation of war from temporal and spatial limitations. In *American Sniper*, war is never-ending and is not limited to a specific place. War is represented as a flow of violence and as a part of trans-historic and universal feelings. In other words, Kyle's legend can be interpreted as a justification of war as an immanent reality. From this perspective, war can be waged whenever and wherever. In that sense, *American Sniper* is without doubt a product and a relay of the 'war on terror': a never-ending conflict.

Notes

1. In the text, I will use the term *American Sniper* as a synonym of 'Kyle's legend'.
2. The notions and the relations between 'war' and the 'war on terror' are understood in a specific way. The later designates the historically situated condition that make possible and encourages the existence of the former. 'War' is therefore conceived here as a larger political-military project which is actualized and legitimated under a specific form in the context of the 'war on terror'.
3. Woodward and Jenkins (2012, 496) focus on three sorts of 'geopolitical imageries': Soldiers' 'explanations of the rationale for deployment; their portrayals of the combatants and non-combatants against and with whom their authors are deployed; and the representations of the places and spaces of conflict through which the geopolitical imaginaries they communicate are constituted'.
4. War memoirs or visual productions dealing with the experience of soldiers on battlefields are of course narratives that existed before the post-9/11 conflicts. This article is limited to the significations of these contents for the current context of the war on terror.
5. By 'rational realm' I refer to the 'classical' state discourse on war as a rational and controllable reality. The progressive bureaucratization of warfare military institutions has indeed historically encouraged the construction of a strategic knowledge that eliminates (or hides) human contingency and emotions (pains, cries, fear) during the conduct of armed confrontations in order to provide a controllable imagery of it (Wasinski 2011, 58).

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