THE ANTHROPOCENE, WAR AND THE NEW BESTIALIZATION OF THE HUMAN
A Popular Visual Media Perspective

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Abstract

Combining cultural theory- and screen research, this article examines the important but underexplored role 'bestialization' plays in the proliferation of contemporary films and television narratives about the relation between terrorism, war and the Anthropocene. I will argue that, on the one hand, film and television texts circulating cultural perceptions of conflicts in the Middle East mobilize conventional narratives of political justifications (or criticisms) of violence, but also subvert the conventions that function as vehicles of the cultural iconography of the war on terror. Similarly, these texts, as products of cultural symbolization, re-engage ethics and agency in the context of transgression, re-inscribing the logic of 'us vs. them' into processes of victimization, and to a sense of perpetual crisis in the Anthropocene epoch.

Keywords: Bestialization, Autoimmunity, Anthropocene, symbolism, media

This article focuses on war-on-terror films and television series, examining how concepts of violence circulate between political and philosophical discourses and Hollywood's renditions of the subject. Peter Sloterdijk described the entanglement of (popular) culture and violence as the 'new bestialization of man'.[1] Central for Foucault (*Dits et Ecrits*), and revisited by Agamben (*Homo Sacer*), 'bestialization' has assumed a number of interrelated denotations, ranging from appeals to bio-power, to pathological fantasies fused with social anxieties, to Derrida's conceptualization of hospitality, punishment, and democracy (*Beast and the Sovereign*).

Combining cultural theory- and media research, this article examines the genealogy of bestialization as a cultural concept, and the important but unexplored role it plays in the proliferation of contemporary war-narratives.

1 P. Sloterdijk, *Rules for the human zoo: A response to the 'Letter on Humanism*, in "Environment and Planning D: Society and Space", 27, 2009, pp. 14-15.

High-budget popular films like *Green Zone* (2010, dir. Paul Greengrass)*, Body of Lies* (2008, dir. Ridley Scott)*, The Kingdom* (2007, dir. Peter berg)*, The Hurt Locker* (2008, Kathryn Bigelow)*, Act of Valor* (2012, dir. Mike McCoy and Scott Waugh), or *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012, dir. Kathryn Bigelow), *Good Kill* 2014, dir. Andrew Niccol)*, Eye in the Sky* (2015, dir. Guy Hibbert)*, Lone Survivor* (2013, dir. Peter Berg)*, American Sniper* (2014, dir. Clint Eastwood) and *13 Hours* (2016, dir. Mitchell Zuckoff) move beyond conventional re-narrations of political justifications (or criticisms, for that matter) of violence, and subvert the conventions that established themselves as vehicles of the popular cultural iconography of the war on terror. Similarly, much discussed and also controversial television series like *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-2020), *Tyrant* (FX, 2014-2016), *Seal Team* (CBS, 2017-), *Jack Ryan* (Amazon Prime, 2018-)*, Baghdad Central* (Channel 4, 2020-)*, or The Caliphate* (SVT1, 2020), re-engage the ethics and aesthetics (i.e. spectacularity) of violence in the context of our predicament in the Anthropocene epoch of human and geological crisis. This article argues that 'bestialization' marks a space where the aesthetic and the politico-ethical dimensions of violence constantly supplement (i.e. replace and extend) each-other.

It is through this supplementation that the cultural 'iconography' of violence is re-positioned, and it is through this supplementation that these narratives constitute a context of symbolization for the lived experience of crisis that the Anthropocene has become equated with. The question follows, then, whether there is a direct link between an understanding of the Anthropocene as generalized human predicament (of displacement, of social polarization, of environmental, economic and political crises), as Scranton, and Crutzen and Schwagerl would argue,[2] and manifestations of such crises in forms of violence, as Zizek would describe it in *Violence: Six Sideway Reflections*, as well as in *Living in the End Times*?[3] As Nafeez Ahmed argues in an opinion piece, 'war (…) is carved into the sinews of the Anthropocene'.[4] The impacts of human activity on the ecosystem, and,

2 Cf. R. Scranton, Roy. *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, City Lights, San Francisco 2015; P. Crutzen, Paul and Ch. Schwagerl, *Living in the Anthropocene: Toward a New Global Ethos*, in "Yale Environment", 360, 2011, http://e360.yale.edu/features/living_in_the_anthropocene_toward_a_new_global_ethos Last accessed: 25 November, 2020.

3 S. Zizek, *Violence. Six Sideway Reflections*, Picador, New York 2008; Id., *Living in the End Times*, Verso, London and New York 2011.

4 N. Ahmed, *War, empire, and racism in the Anthropocene*, in "Mondoweiss: News& Opinion about Palestine, Israel & the United Stated", July 3, 2019,

consequently, on the human race itself indicate that technological acceleration and development are very much driven by ideologies underlying the exploitative practices of neoliberal capitalism that is eventually caught up in a complicated reciprocal relationship with racial, ethnic, political and religious disempowerment, and the territorial displacement of disempowered identities. As Ahmed observes, 'ecocide and genocide, the destruction of our environmental life-support system, and our direct destruction of the lives of members of our own species (…) are symptoms of the system of human life itself, in its current form'.[5] For these reasons, it is important to re-situate the understanding of terrorism, the war on terror – and our cultural practices to symbolize them – primarily within the context of the Anthropocene.

Iconographies of Violence: Mediating the War on Terror

It has by now become a truism to say that the attacks of September 11, 2001 changed the ways we think about war, security, violence, territory, enemy, and by extension, ethics, agency, religion, subjectivity and otherness. In *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* Derrida provocatively claims that there is a connection between economic and cultural globalization, and the globalization (universalization) of concepts like war, enemy, terror(ism).[6] He also points out that with this universalization came a destabilization of meanings: these concepts (war, enemy, terrorism, civilian and militant) gradually lost their pertinence, because the distinctions between them (upon which the 'us and them' rhetoric of the Cold War was predicated) are becoming more and more contested.[7] As a consequence, the increasing challenge to the concepts of the nation-state (and by extension, of self and identity, territory, the inside and the outside), Derrida argues, are paralleled by a new form of violence perpetuating itself – one that discloses specific autoimmune practices of political power as compared to the era of the

https://mondoweiss.net/2019/07/empire-racism-anthropocene/ Last accessed: 25 November 2020.

5 *Ibid*.

6 J. Derrida, and G. Borradori, *Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides – a dialogue with Jacques Derrida*, in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2003, pp. 88-89.

7 Cf. J. Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2005, pp. 154-156.

Cold War. As Derrida observes, the Cold-War rhetoric of Us and Them was predicated on territorial claims, where the enemy was clearly relegated to an 'outside' and was clearly identifiable: it had a face and a name.[8] In contrast, after 9/11 this identification became problematic as the enemy was no longer outside; it operates as a 'cell' within the social body.[9]

Therefore, in order to counter this enemy, the social body has to turn on itself. My aim by pointing this out is to link this autoimmunity to the bestialization of the human, and to argue that the proliferation of the culture of paranoia is supplanted by perpetual war – not against a clearly definable enemy, but against a concept (terrorism) that is fundamentally iconographic and constructed through ideology. I want to emphasize that the realism of this concept is based on, borrowing Terry Lowell's words, a 'succession of theories which describe it in mutually exclusive terms'[10] of aggressors and victims, good and evil, bestial and familiar, internal and external. Therefore, I want to argue that the notion of terror(ism) depends on the discursive framework through which it is mediated. As a consequence, the iconographic character of terror, by way of re-currences, becomes a 'currency' – something that can be capitalized on by the very discourses (and forms of mediation) that perpetuate it. It's enough to remind of scenes like Arabs videoing events in films like *The Hurt Locker* (on the rooftops, while the main character tries to defuse a car bomb); or the opening scene of *The Kingdom*, where a grandfather is making his grandson watch the unfolding attack on civilians, or the feeds coming from the body cams of the US agents storming a safehouse, or the communication strategies of the Islamic State videoing executions. In other words, images of terror become a currency themselves, which are traded and circulated as representations of bio-power – both as celebratory propaganda materials on the part of terrorist organizations, as well as devices of vilification and political justification of state-sanctioned violence against actual or suspected aggressors on the part of authorities fighting terrorism.

Todd Schack makes similar observations when he argues that we certainly use representations of past wars to wage our present wars. He reminds us that there seems to be a consensus among media scholars looking through cultural production of these conflicts that 'there exists a critical nexus of propagandistic function between Washington and Hollywood' – it

8 Cf. J. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, Verso, London 2006, p. 232.
9 *Ibid*.
10 T. Lowell, *Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics, Pleasure,* BFI, London 1980, p. 15.

is also 'extremely well-executed'.[11] John Tulloch and R. Warwick Blood[12] point out that media/popular representations of terror and terrorism are predicated on (and circulate) images that they call icons. While they call them icons on the basis of the cultural and political status they achieve mostly by way of their frequency, I believe what makes these media representations peculiar, apart from their frequency, is a specific semantic density at their core, which also makes them controversial and subversive, especially in the cases of later film productions like *Green Zone*, *Lone Survivor*, *Eye in the Skye*, *Sand Castle*, and television series like *Baghdad Central*, or *The Caliphate*, that are a fundamentally critical of the ideological framing of the war on terror, or at least offer a less biased view of the role of the US in the conflicts in the Middle East. Tulloch and Warrick Blood also emphasize that a 'personal encounter with iconic images and prevailing Western discourse on terrorism lends a subjective and reflexive dimension to our discourse' in the sense that all constructions of the iconic 'among media practitioners, public intellectuals, or within academia are in important ways subjective'.[13] They also point out the convergence of old media (the foreign journalist) and new media (local people using the internet) in this process, and urge us to acknowledge the importance of tracing the discursive uses of the term 'iconic', because, as they suggest, the unmasking of icons is always relative to discursive frames adopted by people who select them for remediation'.[14] Film and television narratives of conflict operate on this principle. As examples of 'modern epistemological realism', they construct knowledge.[15] As far as the figure of terror (and consequently the figure of the terrorist) is concerned, the pertaining practices of mediation revolve around a central principle (or controversy) of 'objectivity vs. reflexivity'.[16]

This is another reason why (popular) media representations of terrorism prove to be so iconic and powerful, and why media studies approaches and methodologies are useful in the deconstruction of such iconologies is their ability to account for the elements of staging spectacularity, and seriality.

11 T.A. Schack, *Perpetual Media Wars: The Cultural Front in the Wars on Drugs and Terror*, in *9/11, The War on Terror, and American Popular Culture*, Eds. M. Hill, A. Schopp, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison 2009, p. 65.
12 J. Tulloch, and R. Warrick Blood, *Icons of War and Terror: Media Images in the Age of International Risk*, Routledge, New York 2012.
13 Ivi, p. 7.
14 *Ibid*.
15 *Ibid*.
16 Ivi, p. 8.

Seriality itself is encoded into the structure of terrorism by default: events like the Charlie Hebdo shootings (2015), the Sousse Beach Attack in Tunisia (2015), the Paris Attack (2015), the attacks in Brussels, Nice and Berlin (2016) and the many tragic events that followed are ample and devastating proof of that, and have demonstrated that terrorism is not always based on the recurrence of (temporally and spatially) isolated attacks, but also that they can take the form of self-replicating coordinated events taking place in multiple locations but relatively within as short time frame, made possible by the same technological and media apparatuses that are used to fight terrorism.[17]

Bestialization, bio-power and technology, it would so appear, are mobilized by both parties to achieve their goals; therefore these features function as iconographic supplements the currency of which can be changed, exhausted and then replenished – depending on the context and the framework of remediation. Autoimmunity and bestialization not only become the means to demonize the enemy, but also the means to construe an identifiable one – in a gesture towards the othering of that which the social body wishes to demarcate itself from, which it casts out as 'wholly other'.[18]

Apart from symbolization, media technology plays a further important role – rendering surveillance practices as a manifestation of autoimmunity, which consequently becomes a key element in of the intricate relation between structural violence, practices through which power is exerted, and the rituals through which it is symbolized. As Bräuchler and Budka observe, 'media technologies can be used to both exert or mediate physical violence, through (…) the visualisation of violence, and to contribute to structural violence in terms of media access, literacy and skills or the way in which people are represented – be it conflict parties or others'.[19] In close relation to this, we have to acknowledge that one slightly overlooked aspect of the Cold War, beside the cultural, symbolic and geopolitical impact of the arms race (that, paradoxically, still managed to maintain a balance of opposites) was in fact the weaponization of information through the deployment and increasing technologization of surveillance and espionage. Television series like *24*, *Homeland, The Americans* or *Berlin Station* provide examples of practice to these observations inasmuch as their rendition of their subject matter relies on the legacies of films and television series of (and about) the Cold War.

17 For a detailed break-down of modern day and post9/11 terror attacks globally, see for instance https://since911.com/explore/terrorism-timeline#jump_time_item_494.

18 Cf. J. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, Verso, London 2020, p. 232.

19 *Theorizing Media and Conflict*, ed by Ph. Budka and B. Bräuchler, Bergham, New York 2020, p. 12.

Interestingly though, whilst autoimmunity was mobilized as a key stratagem the purpose of which was to identify the enemy (within), and to destroy it 'from within', and whilst both parties were committed to these ends, it remains a question whether this understanding of autoimmunity, as a gesture of bio-power, also directly implies (as Derrida suggests) that the state or the self was less suicidal (less prone to autoimmune responses) than it is today. To be more precise, it is disputable wether the epistemological grounds of autoimmunity changed: the media, the technology might have become more digital, but it is a question whether these changes also brought about an epistemic shift commensurate to the one that was witnessed at the time of the Cold War, in comparison to the ways warfare itself was negotiated prior to that.

Agency, Morality, and the Symbolic

As we will have seen, there is always-already a symbolic element of self-justifying agency in the semiotics of terror via the ways it itself constructs meanings. Zizek points to increased insecurity and a self-imposed sense of inferiority underlying any manifestation of fundamentalism.[20] To put the self-representational imperative of terrorism into the context of symbolic cultural practices, Terry Eagleton draws a parallel with the popular cultural character of religion, arguing that since it is a symbolic system, in spite of the ban on the representation on deity, at the core of any religious ideology is the need for representation – one way or another. It is the controversial character of the practice of representation/mediation/simulation that propels religious ideology.[21] This is clearly visible in practices of iconoclasm. Iconoclasm puts into the centre / showcases the very notion of representation by denying it – but one can only deny something one has a concept of. Therefore, in an eminent minimalist approach, one might also argue that terrorism, for instance, to assert itself radically and consequently, would need to move beyond aspirations to a negative theology, that is, it would need to abandon and obliterate from its discursive practice the language of metaphysics.

From a different standpoint, Mathias Nilges argues that the war on terror is also to be understood, at least in part, as 'fight against the chaos and

20 S. Zizek, *Some Politically Incorrect Reflections on Violence in France & Related Matters*, 2. *The Terrorist Resentment*. https://www.lacan.com/zizfrance1.htm. Last accessed: 25 November, 2020.

21 T. Eagleton, *The Death of God and the War on Terror*, Theos, London 2016.

complexity of our own post-Fordist world'.[22] It symbolically emerges as an 'existential struggle' in the wake of a radically changed present that brought about the change of the very grounds upon which we negotiate (individual as well as national, ethnic, religious, cultural) identities. Nilges' claim that 'hunting down' the terrorist is really an externalization of the rejection of that part of our identity that we would like to repress echoes some Kristevan formulations about abjection, but it also highlights an important aspect of our practices of symbolization: the other, the unknown, the bestial is fought 'over there, outside of us, so we don't have to fight it at home'.[23]

In this respect Nilges seems to be in contradiction with Derrida and Habermas' ideas about terrorism and autoimmunity, and most importantly with their claim that during the Cold War the enemy had a face and a name and was relegated to a territory, to a space that was physically outside of the borders. Nilges also talks about how, because of the chaotic character of the present, we turn toward nostalgias of the past where there was some order,[24] and claims that this is one reason why the portrayal of the fight against terrorism never brings closure, 'as opposed to the tv dramas and films of the 80s where the hero emerged victorious and defeated the 'enemy' once and for all'.[25] Today, the hero is caught up in a vicious circle. Carrie Mathison's character in *Homeland* (played by Claire Danes) also displays this pattern: the 'hero' who herself is criminalized and branded a terrorist embodies the aforementioned instance of autoimmunity, as well as the idea of Derridean 'real and symbolic suicides', by becoming the enemy of the state.

These considerations also bring us back to the uncannily conducive similarity between terror and seriality: the immense popularity and hegemony of the serial format makes this theme particularly suitable for both film and television. Terror is of a serial character: it is unpredictable, it operates with suspense, it reproduces newer and newer phases of attack, retaliation, recovery and resolution without actually bringing the sequence of events to a closure. This can be clearly seen on multiple levels in the video-game-like narrative structure of the *Hurt Locker* as well: the entire film is based on a series of bomb-disarming missions, there's repeated captions announcing

22 M. Nilges, *The Aesthetics of Destruction: Contemporary US Cinema and TV Culture'* in J. Birkenstein, A. Froula, K. Randell (eds.), *Reframing 9/11. Film, Popular Culture and the 'War on Terror*, Continuum, London 2010, p. 28.
23 *Ibid*.
24 Ivi, p. 29.
25 *Ibid*.

the number of days remaining in the team's rotation, and the narrative ends with the main character (Sergeant First Class William James, played by Jeremy Renner) going back and starting over his rotation at the end of the film. Such deferrals of closure not only relativize assertions and demarcations of good and evil, they also call into question human agency, reverting us to the realization of the systemic character of crisis and conflict in the Anthropocene, an epoch in which 'our sense of security has become eroded in relation to our own human identity'.[26]

The alignment of the political dimension of terrorism, as well as that of the fight against it, with symbolism, agency and religion also necessitate the rethinking of its potential ethical dimension as well. Not just in the sense whether or not terrorism can be morally justified, but also in the sense of justifying the use of violence and war to fight it. How does one demarcate morally justifiable uses of violence to ensure the welfare and safety of a community and of property, of cultural values and systems of beliefs from aggression and existential threats, from morally questionable uses of violence as means of retaliation or preventive measures? Cynthia Weber replicates the observation that 9/11 'arguably rendered another rethinking of US morality possible' and in close connection to that, also the grounds of American identity, more importantly 'who' Americans are and 'what' America represents to the world.[27] Her observations somewhat side-track the understanding that film and television play a crucial role (maybe they become the sole most important cultural platforms) in self-representation, suggesting that such narratives and such remediations will have homogenously impacted on the construction of national character, identity, agenda, stance and determination to present a unified front in the face of trauma and ordeal. It is beyond doubt that understanding the ways audiences engage with such content has been central to mapping both narratives of conflict, and to a better positioning of the role of visual media in the shaping of both policy, the public perception of conflict, and forms of political and social activism.[28] In close connection to these, however, the authenticity and

26 D.L. Palatinus, *Humans, Machines and the Screen of the Anthropocene*, in "Americana E-Journal", Vol. XIII, No 2 Fall, 2017, http://americanaejournal.hu/vol13no2/palatinus, last accessed: 25 November, 2020.

27 C. Weber, *Imagining America at War: Morality, Politics and Film*, Routledge New York, 2006, p. 2.

28 See for instance S.M. Falero, *Digital Participatory Culture and the TV Audience: Everyone's a Critic*, Palgrave, Macmillan, London 2016, p. 125, and also N. Carpentier, *Media and Participation: A Site of Ideological-democratic Struggle*, Intellect, Bristol 2011.

accuracy of these portrayals of conflict are pivotal aspects be considered when assessing film and television as (in)accurate indicators of social reality and people's lived experiences of trauma and crisis. The relatability of these mediations is closely tied to their affective value. Audiences respond strongly to mediations of pain and suffering. After 9/11, public discourse has become dominated by intimate stories of suffering and pain.[29] Consequently, film and television are conducive media to the emergence of the mode of testimony by way of their ability to sustain both proximity and distance between the viewer and the suffering subject.

But for Weber, the question of whose testimony (whose suffering) we see implies the consequential unmasking of any claim to (American) moral superiority: 'Why do they (i.e. the terrorists) hate us?' In such an approach, the question of identity, then, perhaps, is phrased along the wrong lines, in an invalid and counterproductive epistemic framework that is predicated on separation and exclusion: what she calls the 'us-them' question was eventually put forward by the Bush administration's official response: 'we' are defined in relation to 'them'; 'we are the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world and they are the 'axis of evil'.[30]

From a different perspective, Christine Muller explains the affective power of the testimony by referring to witnessing victims jumping from the windows of the World Trade Center. According to her, this trauma prompts us face the 'precariousness of our own bodily integrity and agency', namely that we are not in control of our circumstances, and this 'generates a sense of ourselves as being permeable'.[31] This permeability is a tension between 'identification with and resistance to those who are vulnerable because their vulnerability prompts consideration of our own contingent power and fortune'. She also writes that there is often a cultural repression of memories of violence and victimization due to an 'active fear of identifying with those whose fate forces us to acknowledge that we are not in control of our own'.[32]

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29 L. Berlant, *The subject of true feeling: Pain, privacy, and politics*, in A. Sarat and T.R. Kearns (eds.), *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law*, University of Michigan Press, Michigan 1999, p. 49.

30 Cf. G.W. Bush, *State of the Union Address*, January 29, 2002. https://web.archive.org/web/20111011053416/http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/4540 last accessed: 25 November, 2020.

31 Ch. Mulle, *Witnessing the Fall: September 11 and the Crisis of the Permeable Self*, in A. Schopp and M.B. Hill. (ed.), *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture*, Associated University Press, Cranbury NJ 2009, p. 47.

32 *Ibid*.

These thoughts echo Derrida's explication of 'autoimmunity' as suicide and might cast new light on the understanding of our fear of and suspicion towards the Other, revealing the very heterogeneity lying at the core of Otherness (the victim, the migrant, the alien). Muller argues that in this respect the permeable self is a 'site for the struggle of compassion, a formidable process of negotiating the boundaries of one's person'.[33] One other consequence of our shared predicament in the Anthropocene, then, is the possible acknowledgement that is it the capability of suffering that connects all sentient beings. It is this shared experience of suffering that connects us all – more than the things that separate us. It is, therefore, a spectre of agency (the ability to suffer, and to empathize with the suffering of the Other), it is the hauntology of trauma and suffering that makes our selves permeable: terror inflicts feelings of helplessness – this is its key to its operation. It is this hauntology that drives up emotions in the *Hurt Locker* in a scene where sergeant James finds the mutilated body of a little boy he made friends with earlier in the film, or when he cannot disarm the bomb attached to an innocent bystander to draw out members of the bomb squad. Or it is a similar rendition of testimony about the dehumanizing aspect of terror in *Good Kill*, when the drone operators witness a woman being raped multiple times: her helplessness is internalized particularly by the female drone operators, and re-writes the gender-dynamics between her and her male colleague.

War in the Anthropocene: some rare examples of practice

In the following, I'll offer a brief discussion of three texts, one film text and two television programs. Two of these are lesser known and thus don't belong to overrepresented examples of war-on-terror narratives, but which might cast some provocative insights on the ways Western mediatization of conflict mobilizes specific ideological patterns and visual iconographies.

Tyrant (FX, 2014-2016) is an American political drama series that ran on FX between 2014 and its cancellation in 2016. It offers a very peculiar take on the 'terrorist – freedom fighter' dichotomy, and thus revolves intensely around the question of autoimmunity par excellence by way of its presentation of a rivalry between two brothers, and a country torn by internal conflict and the prospect of civil war over the style of political leadership (and pertaining economic ties to super-powers not without their own exploita-

33 *Ibid*.

tive agendas). One of brothers, Bassam 'Barry' Al-Fayeed (Adam Rayner), is an Americanized character (having studied and lived in the US for many years before relocating back to Abuddin with his family), who is trying to reconnect with his mother and alienated and mentally unstable brother, Jamal (Ashraf Barhom). Abbuddin is presented as a seemingly modernized society, but one that is a quintessential victim of the Anthropocene epoch both economically and politically. It is rich in natural resources, that would potentially enable Abuddin to become an economically powerful player in the area. But the country eventually falls into chaos under Jamal's tyrannic rule, and because of the power games of international politics that involves super-powers like the US and China attempting to exert their political and economic influence in order to get access to Abuddin's natural resources. Although Jamal tries to be a good leader, he is forced to be brutal and despotic because of the circumstances.

A very plausible example of the autoimmune character of the new form of violence is presented in *Tyrant*: the conflict between the brothers is paralleled by the conflict between the supporters of the regime and the so-called resistance (referred to as the Caliphate), whom Jamal labels 'terrorists'. And indeed, they do what terrorists do, they blow up solders protecting the regime, they murder the Chinese ambassador's wife at the ground-breaking ceremony of the new oil platform. To retaliate, Jamal's uncle uses gas to kill the terrorists but there's a lot of civilian casualties after the rockets hit the neighborhood where they were hiding. Jamal's killing of his uncle with the model of the oil well is just one of the many autoimmune acts of symbolic suicides through which the Al-Fayeed family turns on itself, as an allegorical rendition of the ensuing conflict encapsulating the country. Interestingly though, in the context of the program it is Bassam (or Barry) who embodies that foreign otherness that is looked upon with suspicion: his

perspective oscillates between the indisde and the outside, between the domestic, and the wholly other. The viewers clearly identify more easily with the 'American' Bassam, and to them everything associated with Abuddin is 'other' – except Bassam.

The narrative then literally revels in clichés associated with popular takes on the war on terror and the political actualities of the Middle Eastern conflict, including references from young people from the Western world joining the Caliphate (an equivalent of ISIS), to the abuse and instrumentalization of young women, and to depictions of the differences and rivalries between radical and progressive views of Islam. The series does make some interesting and thought-provoking points about testimony, victimization and suffering – and about the false claims conflicting parties often

make about them and use them as justification. In one of the central scene's Bassam's friend tells to one of the female freedom fighters (Caliphate supporters): 'don't' assume that what happened here gives you a monopoly on suffering'. This is a very important sentence, because it sums up the ideological and constructed character of the cause, the justification of violence and retaliation pretty much along the lines outlined above: in war-on-terror film and television the politico-ethical focus is haunted by a reverse logic where the hierarchy of evidence and interpretation is subverted, as is the uncanny relation between victim and aggressor.

The reason why *Tyrant* is a good example of practice because, like many of the better-known television series, like *Homeland*, or *Berlin Station*, it was born in the context of debates around the territorial claims and political growth of the Islamic State, and the upheaval of immigration from Africa that necessitated the rethinking of Europe's policies concerning altruism and hospitality. Clearly, in the light of such developments, the very idea of autoimmunity needed to be repositioned with respect to Europe's obligation to defend itself against aggression, but also with respect to the growing populistic voices reverting to arguments about cultural clash, eventually conflating the discourse on cultural incompatibility, cultural aggression with matters of national security. These changes also meant concepts of territory, hospitality, border and control, had to be re-thought. Migration became a philosophical problem –and cultural practices of symbolization and mediation turned to history for parallels and for cues to help understand the situation.[34] One dilemma of the Anthropocene thus concerns the cultural dimension the cultural and ethnic character of future countries: new ways need to be found to rethink homogeneity and hegemony to avoid reinscriptions of less violent forms of neo-colonialism.

This brings me to my second, brief example of practice in relation to *Homeland* and television's participatory culture. On 15 October 2015, and article was published in the Guardian about how Syrian graffiti artists sabotaged an episode of *Homeland*.[35] According to the report, they had been contacted by the showrunners who wanted them to provide Arabic script for a scene that was supposedly set in a refugee camp in Syria. They

34 Cf. Th. Nail, *A Tale of Two Crises: Migration and Terrorism after the Paris Attacks*, in "Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism, Vol 16. No.1, 2016, pp. 158-167.

35 C. Phipps, *'Homeland is racist': artists sneak subversive graffiti on to TV show*, in *The Guardian*, 15 October, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2015/oct/15/homeland-is-racist-artists-subversive-graffiti-tv-show Last accessed: 25 November, 2020.

originally were supposed to create scripts that would indicate pro-Assad sentiment, but instead, as *The Guardian* pointed out, the artists decided to air their criticism of the show as being reductive, racist, and prone to enhance negative stereotypes about Muslims. The showrunners decided to embrace this 'artistic sabotage' by using the show's subversive qualities as an explanation, claiming *'Homeland* has always tried to be a stimulus for conversation'.

So obviously there would be a reading of this incident that would bring back the age-old debate about the 'reality of television'. Reality, or rather realism, should not (or not only) be a function of 'authenticity' but rather a supplement (an add-on) to it: it is the reality OF television, that is, reality that television helps to create. Arguments that TV is misleading, inauthentic, biased, stereotypical etc. often dismiss these narratives as 'just' stories. But apparently people (in all the relevant contexts) respond quite strongly to television's depiction of events and cultural ideas, which also indicates that television is to be taken seriously precisely because it can be dangerously subversive. Does it mean that in the hand of the machinery of power, it is 'just' communication, rhetoric and propaganda? Obviously, these activist responses (and the ensuing media frenzy unfolding on multiple platforms – comments, newspaper articles, Facebook memes etc) are a clear manifestation of TV's participatory agency, and of the fact that TV exists within the participatory culture of media broadly defined. It indicates that people take television seriously – not only as constitutive of ideology, but also in terms of activism and agency.

My third example is again an a-typical war-on terror film called *Sand Castle* (2017 Netflix, dir.Fernando Coimbra). A rather slow-paced, film, it tells the story of young soldiers in Iraq, on a mission that they perceive to be a 'loser'. They're tasked with securing the water supply of a village where the locals are not willing to cooperate with them because they're afraid of possible retributions from radicals. The film presents the war experience from the point of view of the privates who are sent there to do a job and in the end they look out for each other. This is particularly highlighted in the fight scenes, where they're fighting a faceless enemy. This is one of the major narratives (and rhetorical) features of the film, namely that the audience doesn't get to see who's shooting at them, they don't get to know what group is targeting them (or why). After an IED attack, the soldiers are extracted from the village that they were supposed to defend and where they were supposed to restore the water supplies. Ocre (the main character, played by Nicholas Hoult) arrives back in Baghdad, and in a

symbolic scene, he goes to take a shower, water working, but he first closes the tap, watching the water going down the drain. The film is seemingly about failed missions in the Iraq War – but the usual rhetoric about camaraderie and kinship lend much of the dynamism rather than the combat scenes alone. Failure on the ground is depicted as the indirect result of the political climate and of the culture of paranoia that constant violence perpetuates, a conflict that cannot be removed.

The film does ask the question (through the characters' take on the mission), whether the soldiers were better off leaving the country and its peoples to their own devices? Or does their failure mean the solution to the conflict lies not in the use of weapons but in understanding that the source of the conflict runs deep in the history of tension between different religious groups and tribes in the area?

In the final scene, Ocre is being sent home but he doesn't want to leave, citing 'my job is not done here'. The significance of the scene relies not so much in him wanting to prove something to himself or to his mates. Rather, he is rendered as a political commentary, as a corporative identity of the 'little guy' who was dragged into something he didn't ask for and then was sent home without any cause or closure given. That is the real trauma – the realization of absurdity, and the realization of one's own inadvertent complicity in that absurdity, the reduction of one's identity to an instrumentality that serves a purpose one does not understand, and which only the powerful benefit from. Even though it's not made explicit in the film, the story is also a testimony to the fact that war in the Anthropocene is also motivated by the scarcity of natural resources.

As we have seen, the bodies of discourse presented above are still having a lasting impact as far as conceptualizations and the circulation of cultural ideas about the reason for, and the nature of conflict in the Anthropocene are concerned. The recent radicalization of world politics, social polarization and the growing influence of exclusionary logic (manifest in the form of populistic nationalism, discrimination, and forms of systemic racism) prompt us to rethink our predicament, and the role certain types of narratives may play in the pertaining processes of cultural symbolization. Western takes on the conflict in the Middle East (and on the war on terror) both present a unilateral take and a criticism at the same time. Narratives of redemption (*Act of Valor*, *Green Zone*, *Homeland*, but even *Baghdad Central*) may offer a rehabilitation and emancipation of displaced ethnic, religious and political identities, but these gestures towards emancipation ultimately rely on the vehicle of Western storytelling (and a funamentally

Western perspective). One could ask if this was, again, cultural re-appropriation (i.e. do Western filmmakers have the right, the moral ground, to tell the story of conflicts in the Middle East authentically, enabling Middle Eastern identities to acquire a voice of their own, and offering Western viewers a realistic insight into the lived experiences of conflict and of war on the part of the culturally other? One might argue that true atonement between Western democracies and the multifaceted cultures of the Middle East can only be achieved if Middle Eastern cultures are enabled (and empowered) to come to terms with their own past, and if practices of autoimmunity are supplanted by the emancipatory logic of (Derridean) hospitality. The question remains: what space does the Anthropocene epoch leave for such forms of enablement?