

Utopia and Torture in the Hollywood War Film

Rikke Schubart

I want to show how an unpleasant element – the torture scene in the Hollywood war film – may be read as a site of Utopia. Viewed in a larger perspective, I claim that Hollywood can envision a better society and that popular film can address political ideas of progress and freedom. This approach is, of course, naive and Utopian in the derogatory sense of the word.

The talk is divided into three parts: first, a discussion of *Utopia*; second, a look at *the torture scene* in the Hollywood war film; and, third, popular culture as a site of *naive* political discourse.

Utopia

Now, why use “Utopia”, a word that indicates the very *opposite* of war, in connection with war?

“Utopia” brings to mind Thomas More, the English author and statesman who coined the term and based his novel *Utopia* (1516) on eyewitness accounts of America, the newfound continent. To Europeans, America symbolized a Utopia – constructed from the Greek *uto* (meaning no) and *topos* (place) – which was the dream of an ideal society that existed nowhere.¹ It is not in this sense I use Utopia. Instead, I wish to turn to historian Jay Winter who, in *Dreams of Peace and Freedom: Utopian Moments in the 20th Century* (2006), distinguishes between “major” and “minor” Utopias and Utopians.² Major Utopians are people such as Hitler, Stalin, and Osama Bin Laden, who wanted to alter the order of the world. With their crimes against mankind, the term Utopia was contaminated, says Winter, and rings today with echoes of war, tyranny, and genocide. Reclaiming the term’s positive content – the ideal society – Winter coins the expressions *minor utopians* and *minor utopias*. Minor Utopians are people with visions of things that will make the world better, “visions of partial transformations, of pathways out of the ravages of war, or away from the indignities of the abuse of human rights. Such imaginings are powerful and sketch out a world very different from the one we live in, but from which not all social conflict or all oppression has been eliminated” (Winter 2006: 5).

One example of a minor Utopian is French lawyer René Cassin, who after being wounded in the First World War fought for war veterans’ rights and, during the Second World

War, for human rights. Cassin believed such rights should be above politics and nationalism. In 1948, his labor resulted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is an example of how minor Utopians “have focused less on nation and social class and more on civil society and human rights” and have “a more limited, decentered, eclectic, transnational approach, which paradoxically aims at the construction of ‘global civil society’” (Winter 2006: 6). Working within nations and institutionalized systems, minor utopians seek to realize their visions to the benefit of a global and transpolitical civilization.

Winter points to a paradox at the heart of Utopia: It is both a narrative “imagining a radical act of disjunction, enabling people, acting freely and in concert with others, to realize the potential imprisoned by the way we live now,” yet on the other hand it is also a discourse that “force(s) us to face the fact that we do not live there; we live here, and we cannot but use the language of the here and now” (Winter 2006: 3). Utopian discourses envision stories of a better world knowing very well that this world is not ours, yet hoping to realize it in the near future. Aware that today is a period of more warfare than the preceding decades, Winter still points to minor Utopias as “spaces in which the contradictions of a period are embodied and performed, and new possibilities are imagined” (Winter 2006: 205).³

Winter’s Utopians are from the world of politics, law, and religion. I wish to widen his perspective and include film. After all, what better medium than Hollywood to create the visions of which Winter speaks? Many will disagree that Hollywood has anything to do with Utopia, as Hollywood represents a “valueless” culture to both the cultural left and the cultural right. Such an argument, however, is aesthetic rather than political, and I shall leave this out of my talk.

In my use, a minor Utopia is a vision of a better world, a vision that locates problems and ambiguities, that searches for action, that is born out of a faith in mankind and a desire to inspire hope and that, finally, transcends nation, culture, and religion. It is “minor” in the sense that it harbors no illusions of being able to alter the world, yet insists on trying to make it a better place nonetheless.

Torture

I wish now to turn to the torture scene. We find torture in most genres concerned with violence, among them westerns, gangster films, crime films, and horror films.⁴ Here, I shall address torture in the war film and war drama.

The torture scene opens a *zone of confrontation* between “us” and an “enemy”: “we” are virtuous, innocent, strong, and brave, while the “enemy” is evil, sadistic, weak, and inhuman. We find this confrontation in Hollywood films like *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Missing in Action* (1984), and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985). The torture scene uses two metaphors, namely *soldier-as-man-of-steel*, that is, a hero-soldier who does not break under torture (because a “real” man is a man of steel), and *torture-as-test*, that is, torture as a test of the hero’s masculinity (is he a real man?).⁵ Before 1991, the torture scene in war films would use the discourse of masculinity (does this hurt?) and only rarely the discourse of law (is this legal?).

The myth of masculinity in the torture scene ties in with two other metaphors of war described by George Lakoff as *enemy-as-demon* and *the-fairytale-of-just-war*. Lakoff points to an asymmetry between hero and enemy:

The hero is moral and courageous, while the villain is amoral and vicious. The hero is rational, but though the villain may be cunning and calculating, he cannot be reasoned with. Heroes thus cannot negotiate with villains; they must defeat them. The *enemy-as-demon* metaphor arises as a consequence of the fact that we understand what a just war is in terms of this fairy tale (Lakoff 1992: 467).

Before 1991, the conservative metaphors of *soldier-as-steel*, *torture-as-test*, *enemy-as-demon* and *the-fairytale-of-just-war* dominated the American war film. After 1991 and after what we call “the new world order,” these metaphors began to change.

Let me use David O. Russell’s *Three Kings* from 1999 to show this. In *Three Kings*, four American soldiers steal gold from Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War in 1991. As they take the gold from a bunker in the desert, they find dissidents who are being tortured by Saddam’s soldiers. At first they ignore the dissidents, but on a second visit they try to liberate the dissidents while stealing the gold. During the escape, one American soldier is captured and taken down to the cellar.

Down in the cellar, the torturer Captain Said (Saïd Taghmaoui) asks a strange question: “My main man, tell me something: What is the problem with Michael Jackson?” “What do you mean?” says Troy (Mark Wahlberg), the soldier. Said explains: “He come to Egypt. I see picture in newspaper. ‘Hello’ with the white glove. I’m Michael Jackson in my hotel room with my chop-up face. Your country make him chop up his face!” When Troy says Michael Jackson did this to himself, Said hits him: “Your sick fucking country made the black man hate himself, just like you hate the Arabs and the children you bomb over here!” Then the topic changes from Michael Jackson to family. An American bomb has killed Said’s one-year-old son and left his wife without legs. “Can you think how it feels inside your heart if I bomb your daughter?” he asks Troy. Troy imagines his wife and three-week-old daughter Krystal hit by a bomb. And Troy cries. Sitting in the cellar and being tortured by the enemy, the American soldier cries when he imagines what it would feel like if the Iraqi military did to his country what the American military is doing to Iraq.

Comparing this scene with the torture in *Deer Hunter* or *Rambo*, “us” and “the enemy” have changed: in the seventies and eighties, Americans were tortured so they could kill a demon-enemy. Necessity was in place and legitimacy was not an issue. Now, in 1999, the enemy is humanized – the torturer Said only signed up so he could earn extra money for his family – and the hero is a thief. The torture is not harsh, but almost *torture-light*, an educational torture that teaches the American hero to see things from the enemy’s point of view. He realizes the Gulf War is about oil, and when Troy is free he does not kill Said.

The dialogue about Michael Jackson is about torture and about discrimination against two peoples, the Afro-Americans in the US and the Arabs in the Middle East. Metaphors change from *the-soldier-as-steel* to *the-caring-soldier* (after the torture Troy helps the dissidents escape) and from *torture-as-test* to *torture-as-intense-attention*. The torture scene is widened from a zone of confrontation to a *zone of contact* where values are debated.

After 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the metaphors changed once again. Films like *The Road to Guantánamo* (2006), *Rendition* (2007), and *Body of Lies* (2008) problematize torture and the question of legality in, among other places, Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib. The mythic discourse of masculinity, which has until now dominated the torture scene, now meets the juridical discourse of law and politics.

Let me use Ridley Scott's *Body of Lies* (2008) to illustrate this development. Both a drama, a thriller, and an action film, the plot is about CIA agent Ferris (Leonardo DiCaprio) who is hunting terrorists in the Middle East, in particular the terrorist Al-Saleem who is second in command in al Qaeda and responsible for a bombing in Manchester, which we see at the beginning of the film. Ferris is first in Iraq, then in Jordan, where he asks for the help of the Head of Jordanian Intelligence, Hani (Mark Strong).



1. CIA-agent Ferris (Leonardo DiCaprio) must watch the American interrogating of suspects in Ridley Scott's war drama *Body of Lies* (2008), where looks at torture and scenes of torture are constantly in play.



2. Is this torture or interrogation?



3. Bad conscience

Most films place torture in the middle of a plot, where it tests the protagonist, but *Body of Lies* has three torture scenes, one at the beginning, one in the middle and one in the end. Torture frames and structures the entire plot. In *the first torture scene*, CIA agent Ferris is lying on his bed haunted by the memory of Americans beating a man tied to a chair, filmed in blue colors with a camera circling from the victim to Ferris, who is sitting with his back to the beatings, listening and clearly upset. The man dies from being hit with a baseball bat. *The second torture scene* is when Hani, the Head of Jordanian



4. Syrian head of secret police, Hani Salaam (Mark Strong), forces Ferris to watch how they punish people in Syria.



5. Is this torture or punishment?

Intelligence, makes Ferris watch how a prisoner, who is naked and tied to a table, is caned by a Jordanian police officer. As Ferris looks through a glass window in the door he says, “I thought you didn’t believe in torture, Hani Pasha.” “This is punishment, my dear,” responds Hani, “It’s a very different thing. Keep watching. Tell Edward what you have seen.” Edward Hoffman is a CIA officer and Ferris’ boss. Ed (Russell Crowe) has lied to Ferris and Hani. Hani has asked that Ferris does not lie to him if they are to work together, however, the CIA consistently lies to Hani and to everyone else.

Now, in *the third torture scene*, Ferris is captured by terrorist El-Saleem (Alon Abutbul) and tied to a chair with his hands placed on a table. “I have an agent of the CIA,” says El-Saleem, “and that’s what I came to see. And that’s what matters. In this world there’s enough poverty and frustration and danger and passion. There will never be a

shortage of martyrs.” El-Saleem hacks off one of Ferris’ fingers and says: “You know what that camera is for? It’s not for this [the torture]. This . . . this is intermission. It’s for what comes after this. For what comes now.” Ferris tries to talk his way out of the chair. But there are no arguments. “Welcome to Guantánamo,” says El-Saleem and hacks off another of Ferris’ fingers. Then Hani’s men enter the room and Hani, impeccable dressed in suit and tie, turns off the camera.



6. Terrorist leader Al-Saleem (Alon Abutbul) is happy that he has captured CIA-agent Ferris



7. Is this torture or, as Al-Saleem calls it, “intermission”?



8. Ferris has become the victim of war

Several things are interesting:

First, the *zone of torture* has turned from a *zone of confrontation* and a *zone of contact* into a *zone of confusion*. It is unclear *what* exactly we are witnessing: Is the first scene interrogation? Is the second scene punishment? And is the third scene a take to be put out on YouTube? Agents and victims of torture exchange places, and borders dissolve between torture and interrogation, punishment and humiliation. Speaking of borders between heroes and enemies in the war film, Holger Pötzsch points out that they are “crucial factors in a construction of the other as dangerous and less than human – as dogs, the killing of which appears justified and unproblematic” (Pötzsch 2009: 1). When borders dissolve they open a space between hero and enemy that Pötzsch calls *liminal* and where agents can become *liminal beings*:

The term *liminal beings* refers to border-crossing subjects who have equal access to, and thereby render intelligible, both camps divided and constituted through a border. They question and disrupt notions of borders as barriers and facilitate their reconstitution as zones of contact and negotiation (Pötzsch 2009: 7).

In *Body of Lies*, Hani is a liminal agent, namely an Arab who is neither an American soldier nor a Muslim terrorist. Hani is educated, civilized, intelligent, honest, and secular. “You see, Mr. Ferris, here in Jordan to the fundamentalists I am, myself, the enemy. Perhaps the worst kind.” Hani is also uncompromising. His “primitive” violence eventually rescues Ferris, who resigns from the CIA and stays in Jordan where he has fallen in love with a woman, the Iranian refugee Aisha.

Body of Lies presents torture as outside both military and civil law, in a zone of exception. In *State of Exception* (2005, original 2003), Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben says that “the state of exception appears as a threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism” and places his discussion in the context of the military orders given by President Bush on November 13, 2001, “which authorized the ‘indefinite detention’ and trial by ‘military commissions’ (not to be confused with the military tribunals provided for by the law of war) of noncitizens suspected of involvement in terrorist activities” (Agamben 2005: 3). Agamben points out that only democratic states operate with the state of exception, which is claimed when a democracy suspends its democratic laws in order to defend itself, feeling threatened on the level of its very existence.

The problem is how to define legality in a state of exception. What laws apply when laws are suspended? Agamben compares law to language and its application to speech acts. The grammar is to speech what law is to its application. Meaning is attributed to acts not a priori, but *in* their actual doing. To the state of exception, which is a “threshold” and a “zone of indifference,” Agamben adds the “floating signifier”: “In this sense, the floating signifier . . . corresponds to the state of exception, in which the norm is in force without being applied” (Agamben 2005: 37). In *Body of Lies*, torture is a floating signifier. On the DVD’s commentary track, director Ridley Scott compares the caning to his own caning as a boy: “I used to get it at school regularly and people were always horrified that I was caned and it was my fault. But you know what? We’d walk away with pride because there’d be some bruises, so you’d walk away with pride because they were war wounds. You see, the guys would think, wow, that’s fantastic.”⁶

In *Body of Lies*, the discourse of the juridical (is this legal?) is brought to the fore by making Ferris a complicit witness to torture and making the terrorist Al-Saleem acknowledge the illegitimacy of the American torture (“Welcome to Guantánamo”). But *Body of Lies* continues to use the mythic discourse of masculinity (“pride” and “war wounds”). In the third torture scene, the CIA agent is still a *soldier-of-steel* who does not break under torture.

In real life, torture has no place in any definition of law as practiced by any nation that has signed the Declarations of Human Rights or the Geneva Conventions. There are no exceptions. In U.S. memos of 2002, 2003 and 2004, pain was the subject of several memos signed by president Bush (Pffiffer 2008: 155). Discussing the legality of the torture committed at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, political scientist James Pffiffer says the Justice Department “prepared legal memoranda that construed the law so as to exempt the president from constitutional law, criminal law, international law, and customary international law.” But, says Pffiffer, “the president of the United States is in fact bound by these laws and conventions . . .” (Pffiffer 2008: 146). And Agamben concludes by denying the state of exception any juridical legitimacy whatsoever: “[T]his is essentially an empty space, in which a human action with no relation to law stands before a norm with no relation to life” (Agamben 2005: 86).

In the Hollywood war film, torture primarily serves dramatic purposes. Before 1991, it was presented in the conservative discourse of myth using metaphors of masculinity, nationalism, and war. After 1991, the discourse remained mythic, but metaphors went global, criticized America and challenged the soldier myth. After Guantánamo, the discourse of myth came to be mixed with the discourse of law, questioning the legality of torture. The borders between “us” and “them” are now porous, allowing for interracial mixing and contamination with Hani as the ambivalent hero and Ferris staying in Jordan. However, the *soldier-as-man-of-steel* runs too deep to be obstructed by politics, be they national or global.

Ethics and Naive Optimism

Let me now return to Winter’s concept of minor Utopia and minor Utopians.

Hollywood is *not* a place of radical politics. Yet it is also not always a site of complacency. In my research on the Hollywood war film after 1991, I have found directors who I would like to claim as utopian in their engagement with conflict, in their appeal to empathy and debate, in their use of history, in their desire to touch audiences, and in their wish to make the world a better place. One is Steven Spielberg who with *Schindler’s List* made a generation remember Auschwitz and was allowed to film a scene at the concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. Another is Clint Eastwood, who made two war films about Iwo Jima, one of them the first American film in Japanese, and filmed scenes on the island of Iwo Jima, now a Japanese memorial site. Less prolific directors are David O. Russell, who in *Three Kings* employed Iraqi refugees to play dissidents, or Antoine Fuqua, who in *Tears of the Sun* (2003) used refugee child soldiers from Sudan to play war victims. Ridley Scott is a less obvious minor Utopian. His *Body of Lies* is conflicted in its take on torture, yet it places the American hero in a world where American politics and capitalist values are *not* to be equated with America. When Ferris quits, his boss Ed says: “That means you’re

giving up on America.” To which Ferris responds: “Just be careful calling yourself America, huh, Ed.”

Minor Utopians seek to engage everyman in a change. Human Rights, NGO movements, global citizenship. Such dreams are naive, yet still dreamt. The concept of Utopia calls for two kinds of engagement with the world: on the one hand, a naive optimism and hope for a better world, and on the other hand, an engagement in the present in discourses of critique and politics, knowing that our world is not a Utopia.

Hollywood, although capitalist and commodified, can be a site for utopian dreams. In a somewhat different context, Alison Landsberg in her book *Prosthetic Memory*, claims that a revolutionary politics need not be located at the margins, but can also exist at the very center: “Instead of simply disparaging commodity culture, as many cultural critics have done, I believe that the only way to bring about social change and transformation is by working within the capitalist system. There is not some pristine world of politics apart from the world of consumption. Instead, we must use these commodified memories toward politically progressive ends” (Landsberg 2004: 146).

Let me end by quoting one of today’s minor Utopians, Barack Obama, who as a senator in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) wrote: “I believe a stronger sense of empathy would tilt the balance of our current politics in favor of those people who are struggling in this society. After all, if they are like us, then their struggles are our own” (Obama 2006: 68). As a true Utopian, Obama insisted on a naive optimism: “. . . at the core of the American experience are a set of ideals that continue to stir our collective conscience; a common set of values that bind us together despite our differences; a running thread of hope that makes our improbable experiment in democracy work” (Obama 2006: 8).⁷

In Hollywood stories and in politician’s memoirs, dreaming Utopian dreams of peace and freedom is easy. Reality is more complicated. However, the two may benefit from one another through us, audiences and ordinary people, whom both popular film and politicians address.

Utopia is not an object, it is an idea. And a choice. Our choice.

Notes

1. For an account on America and Utopia, see the introduction in Rikke Schubart, *Med vold og magt: actionfilm fra Dirty Harry til The Matrix* (With Passion and Power: The Action Movie from Dirty Harry to The Matrix, Copenhagen: Rosinante, 2001). There is also a pun on *eu* (meaning “good”).
2. I thank Professor Helle Porsdam who in a paper given March 22, 2007, at the seminar “Assessing the Bush Presidency” at the Copenhagen Business School introduced me to minor Utopians and Jay Winter.
3. Also, speaking of imagination, Ruth Levitas, in her book on the social Utopias of the nineteenth and twentieth century, *The Concept of Utopia* (1990), points to four aspects: content (the ideal society); form (Utopia as a literary genre); function (to work for a better society); and, finally, desire. While content, form and function vary, the last element, desire, is constant: “This [constant] element, I would argue, is that of desire – desire for a better way of being and living . . . This includes both the objective, institutional approach to utopia, and the subjective, experiential concern of disalienation. It allows for the desire to be realistic or unrealistic.” Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (New York: Philip Allan, 1990), 7,8.
4. Infamous, of late, are torture-porn films like *Saw* and *Hostel*, the genital torture scene in the Bond film *Casino Royale*, and the FOX drama television series *24*.
5. See Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies* vol. 1 & 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, org. 1977) for an analysis of the male soldier based on a sociological reading of the German Freiburg Corps soldiers.
6. Quoted from commentary track with director Ridley Scott, screenwriter William Monahan and novelist David Ignatius on the DVD from 2009 of *Body of Lies* (2008). Scott ends: “I’d never go and discuss it with my parents, are you kidding! I’d probably get clipped ‘cause it was my fault.”

7. As a president Barack Obama has promised to “. . . end the use of torture without exception and eliminate the practice of extreme rendition; close the Guantánamo Bay detention center; revise the PATRIOT Act so that it gives law enforcement the tools they need without jeopardizing the rights and ideals of all Americans; prevent illegal wiretapping; and restore the right of habeas corpus.” *Change We Can Believe In: Barack Obama’s Plan to Renew America’s Promise* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008), 114.

Filmography

The Bridge On the River Kwai	1957	David Lean (UK/US)
Deer Hunter, The	1978	Michael Cimino
Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence	1983	Nagisa Oshima (UK, Japan)
Missing in Action	1984	Joseph Zito
Missing in Action 2: The Beginning	1984	Lance Hool
Rambo: First Blood Part II	1985	George Pan Cosmatos
Rambo III	1988	Peter MacDonald
G.I. Jane	1997	Ridley Scott
Three Kings	1999	David O. Russell
Hart’s War	2002	Gregory Hoblit
Tears of the Sun	2003	Antoine Fuqua
Syriana	2005	Stephen Gaghan
Rendition	2007	Gavin Hood
Body of Lies	2008	Ridley Scott

Bibliography

- Agamben, G. (2005) *State of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. *Stato di eccezione* published by Bollati Boringhieri, Torino in 2003.
- Lakoff, G. (1992) ‘Metaphors and War: the Metaphor System Used to Justify War in the Gulf’, in Martin Pütz (ed.) *Thirty Years of Linguistic Evolution*. Philadelphia, Pa: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 463-481.
- Landsberg, A. (2004) *Prothetic Memory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Obama, B. (2006) *The Audacity of Hope*. New York: Crown Publisher.
- Pfiffner, J. (2008) *Power Play: The Bush Presidency and the Constitution*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Pöttsch, H. (2009) ‘Challenging the Border as Barrier: Liminality in Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*’, Tromsø University, 1. Article accepted for *Journal for Borderland Studies*, Special Issue, Autumn 2010.
- Winter, J. (2006) *Dreams of Peace and Freedom: Utopian Moments in the 20th Century*. New York: Yale University Press.