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“The true story that inspired the movie”: Cinema, Literature and History in the Digital Age

This essay will seek to carry out a triangulation between Cinema, Literature and History vis-à-vis a profoundly changed social reality. This new millennium is a century where all three vertices of this triangle are newly processed and thus raise identity and identification issues. Cinema, on the one hand, has “expanded” (Youngblood) and has been contaminated by television, videos, electronic arts, documentary, and the web, so much so that the very word “film” (in the sense of material celluloid strip) has hit a crisis. History, on the other hand, from September 11 onwards, overflows in the present and makes its presence conspicuous not only in interpreting the past, but also in the spectacles we are exposed to today (just think about the ISIS videos). Literature, finally, welcomes new forms and genres, from comics to fanzines, from novelizations to Twitter.

In light of this, certain theoretical premises need to be deeply rethought. In this essay, I will try to map out such rethinking and the background determining it, starting from some reflections on the connection between cinema and history and between cinema and literature (both of which I have extensively addressed in other works), before moving on to exploring some case studies.

Cinema & History

I will begin with a theme, namely the connection between cinema and history, that was central to academic conversation in the 1980s, when a number of important symposia and publications in Italy responded to

the translation of works by key French scholars. Going back to this very question after three decades implicitly calls for the consideration of aspects and forms of knowledge absent from those earlier debates. In bringing the discussion up to the present, I aim at employing a plurality of discourses to explore in greater depth the theme of cinema and history and thus clarify a crucial relationship that has been essential to cinema since its inception. Considering that in our digital era the relationship between cinema and history is played out over a broad and complex terrain, I seek to consider cinema in *hybrid* and *expanded* terms. This implies analyzing the relationship of cinema to history within a broader media context, taking into account, for example, adjacent and tangential media such as television, video art, the internet, and video games.

In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to look at the relationship between film and history as a *method* for the investigation of a broad range of film categories: not only those most obviously focused on the recent or distant past, but also those that, though set in the present, feature a dialectical and/or problematic relationship with the past that primarily revolves around questions of identity, be it national, cultural, gender, political, etc. Also crucial to this reflection are those films that manage to influence the collective unconscious and the mentality of their time, becoming agents of history, as well as the ones that are representative of the material habits and customs of their time and are thus valuable *sources* for scholars. Finally, another category deserving attention here is constituted by the movies that, although set in the present, offer a space for reflection on a material and ordinary “micro-history,” where History burns time and breaks into the present and where everything can become History.

There are also other variables in this relationship between history and film to be taken into account. History can be variously interpreted: as critique, between “the end of history” (Fukuyama) and its traumatic return following 9/11; as *imaginary* (Ferro) and as *myth* (Rosen), but also as *atmosphere*; as counterfactual history (“What if?”); as *anti-history* whereby the skepticism and disillusion with present and future is projected onto the past; and, finally, as *anachronistic* configuration, which according to Georges Didi-Huberman is a ‘heretical’ approach to image and history. While confirming the need to conceive cinema and history as part of visual

culture, Didi-Huberman's perspective stresses the intimate 'exuberance', 'complexity' and 'over-determination' of images, forcing a rethinking of the cinema-history relationship within the context of the *construction of memory*. This leads us from 'historical facts' to 'memory facts' (Ricoeur) and to cinema as site of memory (both individual and/or collective). Cinema becomes an ideal space in which to activate not the 'time of dates' (Bloch) but instead a dimension – often framed negatively as nostalgia (Boym) – that humanizes history and constantly reconfigures it. The digital unconscious today plays an unprecedented role between memory and history (Burgoyne), and feminist and gender-inflected theoretical approaches influence the analysis of the dynamics of film production and reception. The complex relationship between cinema and history shapes a thematic rethinking – and overcoming – of traditional histories of national cinemas ranging from '*official*' history to '*popular*' history, from *engagé* to escapist cinema. The cinema-history relationship offers an opportunity to reframe works that have traditionally been excluded from the analysis of both cinema studies and history, not least because of the enduring legacy and role of *engagement* in representing the past (Landy; O'Leary).

"History" as an academic discipline and practice is itself increasingly difficult to define. Scholars from other disciplines contribute today to a revision of the field. Not surprisingly, in the United States especially, a growing number of theoretical studies (ranging from feminist to postmodernist to poststructuralist approaches) have been published, which problematize the definition itself of a historical "event." A relevant case in point is the volume edited by Vivian Sobchack, which she organized entirely around the notion of the search for the object to identify: "What is both poignant and heartening about this novel form of historical consciousness is that it has no determinate 'object'. In great part, the effects of our new technologies of representation put us at a loss to fix that 'thing' we used to think of as History or to create clearly delineated categorical temporal and spatial frames around what we used to think of as the 'historical event'" (5). The third part of the book, in particular, theorizes the end (or various "ends/endings") of *History*, or at least a "*dead end*" of historiography as it has been traditionally conceived and practiced (11). Robert Rosenstone argues that there is a widespread feeling that "traditional history has in this century

run up against the limits of representation,” while Hayden White notes how the events of the twentieth century have challenged the “narrative coherence” of traditional historiography: in the age of television, palm-sized cameras, and digital manipulation, all of us can be filmed, interviewed or ‘digitized’ into a ‘historic’ scene, a significant event, a peculiar case. New representational technologies produce the loss of a ‘fixed object’ of study, a both spatial and temporal frame and framing capable of defining historical ‘events’. Everything, in the end, risks being called “History.”¹

As can be seen, the discourse on the relationship between cinema and history is a complex patchwork, generated by cross- and interdisciplinary approaches and drawing on a variety of academic formations, from sociology to anthropology, from psychoanalysis to feminism and gender theory. The triangulation of this discourse with literature and adaptation from literary texts offers further and extremely fruitful perspectives.

Cinema & Literature

The relationship between American cinema and literature has long been of great interest to scholars.² However, much has changed in the recent past, especially with regard to the multi-media universe, which has revolutionized the publishing industry calling for a rethinking of this relationship. Novels can now be read on tablets, and the very notion of “literature” seems to be in transition: rather than with literature, today we have to deal with the broader issue of “literacy” in a world of screens, as evidenced in the recent scholarship on the topic (Apkon; Vittorini). Literature, moreover, expands to include also non-fiction, biography, graphic novels, new media products, and has to come to terms with a new widespread literacy based on visual and digital media.

Looking at the productions of contemporary Hollywood cinema, one can hardly avoid noticing how the American movie industry constantly loots literature, high and low, both sophisticated authored texts and dreadful penny novels. From Scorsese’s *The Age of Innocence* to *The Counselor* by Ridley Scott, from Wharton’s to Crichton’s novels to the adaptations of Stephen King’s best sellers, countless mainstream movies are based on solid literary

sources. This dependence of the cinematic text on the literary one can perhaps be explained with a lack of courage, a sort of inability to risk, on the part of the movie industry whereby one relies on the proven narrative force of an existing book. It can be argued that this phenomenon has always existed – did not Ford measure himself with Steinbeck, Garnett with Cain, and Welles with Kafka? – and points to the complex development of the connection between literature and film that has been widely debated and theorized (Guidorizzi; Brunetta; Micciché; Moscariello; Bragaglia; Clerc; Serra; Costa; Manzoli). But the impression is that the great directors of the past adapted works by writers who allowed them to express a “world view,” and even when inspiration was drawn from “popular” literature (such as the *hard-boiled novel*) the narrative became a pretext for a cinematic exercise on the ground of genre and its relative codes. Today the process of adaptation (and sometimes of “reduction” in its negative sense) from novel to film seems to be more trivial. Cinema, with the exception of a few outstanding cases, seems to have become the commercial vehicle for its original literary source, with immediate manufacturing of related merchandise and production of imagery. Furthermore, in recent years a new phenomenon has emerged, that of the novels derived from films, or more precisely novels taken from the scripts of famous movies and recent releases. It is a genre that has not yet been theoretically addressed, though it raises a series of anthropological, commercial, psychological, aesthetic, and semiotic questions. Unlike in the past, we are now witnessing a postmodern pastiche of texts, narrators, and styles that is reminiscent of Foucault’s timeless question: “What is an author?” Or better, who is the author of a “mega-text” that takes unexpected routes and features unprecedented loans and shuffling of constitutive elements (with respect to the word, style, imagery)? And who is the viewer, reader-spectator, and then reader again of a text that has become such a mix? This already elaborate scenario is further complicated by the influence exerted by cinematic imagery on the younger generation of authors who write having digested and introjected thousands of movie dialogues and cinematic stereotypes, and who write scripts either because it is the style which suits them best, or because, through their text, they unconsciously participate in a film adaptation. This double unprecedented transition from novel to film and vice versa, from film to novel, is highly

intriguing. As an example let us take *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir and then turned into a novel in 1989. “A novel – says the title page – by N.H. Kleinbaum. Based on the motion picture from Touchstone Pictures. Produced by Steven Haft, Paul Junger Witt, Tony Thomas. Based on the motion picture written by Tom Schulman. Directed by Peter Weir.” The accumulation of names and references, the stratification of ‘produced’, ‘written’, ‘based on’, together with the prominence given on the cover to Robin Williams, the well-known actor and driving force of the film, whose name is placed right above the title, makes it difficult for the general reader to understand who the author is. A similar case is represented by *Natural Born Killers*, a film by Oliver Stone that becomes, on the cover of the novelization (1994), “A novel by John August & Jane Hamsher. Based on a story by Quentin Tarantino.” Tarantino is already a cult name and can be found written in bold on the front cover having more prominence than Stone’s, yet he is not mentioned on the frontispiece, which reads: “Based on a screenplay by David Veloz, Richard Rutowski & Oliver Stone.” Stone himself contributes an introduction to the novel, while an “author’s note” at the beginning of the book (6) mentions among the sources for the story an unfinished novel by Jack Scagnetti, the real-life detective that was the inspiration for the character by the same name. But who is the ‘author’ here? August? Hamsher? Tarantino? Stone? Interesting creative layers shine through the titles of these ‘novels’, titles that are complex as those of the opening credits of a film, a work famously made ‘by many hands’. There are also many cases in which the cover of a book includes references to the film based on it, thus calling attention to the popularity and selling power of movies. Examples in this case are just countless, from *The Silence of the Lambs* – based on the novel by Thomas Harris (1989), whose cover features the movie poster – to *Presumed Innocent* by Scott Turow (1987), to *Forrest Gump*, an adaptation of the novel by Winston Groom (1994), which on the back cover features the opening credits of the film as well as the names of the director and lead actor (Robert Zemeckis and Tom Hanks, respectively). The front says instead: “A great Paramount film,” renewing the glories of the Studio system where the ‘name above the title’ was the exclusive prerogative of the production house. The reliance on the iconic status of cinema helps to explain why novelizations are produced, rather

than the mere publication of existing scripts: novels have become another branch of the Hollywood industry, in which writers with little authorial ambitions spread popular narratives that are already highly recognizable to the public.

Film, Literature, History, the Present

Now that theoretical guidelines have been traced, we can turn to some case studies of this triangle between film, literature, and history in contemporary American cinema. In what has become by now a classic reading of the interplay between myth and history, Baudrillard maintained that “In a violent and contemporary period of history (let’s say between the two world wars and the cold war), it is myth that invades cinema as imaginary content. ... Myth, chased from the real by the violence of history, finds refuge in cinema. Today, it is history itself that invades the cinema according to the same scenario” (43). History, as well, has been exorcised after strongly contributing to the creation of myths now widely shared and, “banished from our lives,” it has been reduced in turn to myth. It is “our lost referent, namely our myth. And as such it takes the place of myths on the screen.” History is therefore a *rétro scenario*, a “corpse” that you can put on stage, a “fossil” that can be represented and “simulated,” and its reappearance does not have the value of awareness, but rather that of nostalgia for a lost referent.

Baudrillard’s argument worked perfectly with the Vietnam War films³ (in particular, *Apocalypse Now*, where the “corpse” evoked by the philosopher seemed to be incarnated in Kurtz’s, symbolically slaughtered at the hands of Willard), but it seems to work today as well, with films and videos on the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, or with propaganda videos and ISIS beheadings. History, no longer in need of sedimentation, or critical distance, bursts immediately in the collective unconscious. Everything immediately becomes History, as witness the rapid spread of slogans such as “Je suis Charlie” or “Je suis Boris.”

Thus Baudrillard’s remarks can also apply to *American Sniper* by Clint Eastwood, who relies on a real life narrative (and autobiography) to tell the

story of the hero sniper Chris Kyle. To further emphasize this connection with reality, the film ends with the real images/footage of the state funeral held for the man who had become a symbol of both American patriotism and the “right/just” war. Another case in point is *Redacted* by Brian De Palma, where the Iraq war becomes a pretext for a meta-discourse on cinema itself in the age of digital and global communication.

Iraq seems to have become the new Vietnam, a magnificent set for endless narrative variations and experiments in the field of language and technology; but in a geographically broader sense all related wars in the Middle East are a huge container of images. This is the case of a series of films of the new millennium, including *The Hurt Locker* by Kathryn Bigelow, set in Iraq⁴; the visionary *Jarhead* by Sam Mendes on the Kuwait war; *Three Kings* by David O. Russell (dating back to 1999), set during the Gulf War and appreciated for its visual experimentation; *In the Valley of Elah* by Paul Haggis, a strongly anti-Yankee film also based on a true story; *Green Zone* by Paul Greengrass (written by Brian Helgeland), based on the book *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* by journalist Rajiv Chandrasekaran; *The Kingdom* by Peter Berg, set in Saudi Arabia; *Body of Lies* by Ridley Scott (starring Leonardo Di Caprio and Russell Crowe), which is an adaptation of the novel by the same title written by *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius. The list could, of course, be longer and extend to include other geographic areas: from the famous *Black Hawk Down*, (directed by the aforementioned Ridley Scott and set in Somalia), based on Mark Bowden’s historical essay *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War*, to *Act of Valor* by Mike McCoy and Scott Waugh (set between the Philippines and Costa Rica), suggesting that the “American war” is global and extends worldwide, and that any scenario can be a good chance for a test in the field of genre and cinematic language.

These movies are often, as we have seen, based on autobiographies. The case of *American Sniper* is paradigmatic, and therefore deserves closer analysis. Eastwood “adapts” his film from the autobiography of Chris Kyle (Kyle, De Felice, McEwen 2012), the “most lethal sniper in the U.S. history.” “The true story that inspired the film” – reads a slogan on the book cover, emphasizing the adherence of the film to the real life of its compelling protagonist, but somehow also revealing the presence of a “true

story,” looming behind the film. Kyle, a member of the United States Navy SEALs, holds a record for the highest number of killings as a “sniper.” For the enemies he was “the devil of Ramadi,” and that detail alone can represent a cinematic memory as a possible reference to another famous film on “snipers:” *Enemy at the Gates* by Jean-Jacques Annaud. Texan-born, cowboy by vocation, hunter by descent, Kyle enlists in the Navy and ships out right at the beginning of the post-September 11 war in Iraq. From there, various missions on the front lines soon become legendary. When he finally takes leave on account of his family needs, he is paradoxically killed by a veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress: where the enemies had failed, the “friendly” fire by a fellow former soldier in his own homeland succeeds. After his death, Kyle is honored by massive state funerals, and his autobiography becomes a posthumous testament, a great memoir of our times.

Eastwood chooses to tell the story through the protagonist’s diary-autobiography as a “warrior,” so the viewer has no doubts and sees the world as being divided between the good and the evil: “Savage, despicable, evil. That’s Evil, the savage evil is contemptible. Here is our enemy in Iraq. What we were fighting in Iraq. That’s why a lot of people, myself included, called the enemy ‘savages’: there really was no other way to describe what we encountered there” (4). Iraqis (who from another point of view could be called ‘partisans’) become the ‘savages’, as the ‘Indians’ of westerns movies or the ‘Charlies’ of Vietnam War films (the latter reference also suggested by the fact that Kyle’s platoon which ships out to Iraq is called ‘Charlie’). “I only wish I had killed more. Not for bragging rights, but because I believe the world is a better place without savages out there taking American lives,” he continues (5). The book can therefore be clearly considered ‘reactionary’, as is further evidenced in passages like the following ones: “If I had to order my priorities, they would be God, Country, Family” (8-9); “I loved what I did. I still do. If circumstances were different – if my family didn’t need me – I’d be back in a heartbeat. I’m not lying or exaggerating to say it was fun. I had the time of my life being a SEAL ... It’s about being a man. And it’s about love as well as hate” (7); “Just a Cowboy at Heart” (8). Chris Kyle embodies all the stereotypes of the American right: the faith in his country, the love for God and family, the

consideration of War as decisive, the hatred of an evil enemy, the absence of any doubt or consideration for others' perspectives. Eastwood seems, at least on the surface, to fully embrace the thesis and the perspective of the book and the adaptation of the text to the film is fairly 'faithful'. The reconstruction of Kyle's life is in fact faithful to his autobiographical tale, from his training as a hunter and as a cowboy with his father to his enlisting as a SEAL; from the missions in Iraq to the description of the killings through his death, properly narrated using 'real' footage materials. The film ends, in fact, with the journey of the coffin along the highways, honored by rows of Americans mourning for the Hero. The film closely follows the book even when describing Kyle's family life, with Taya, his wife, constantly counterbalancing the narrative of her husband's heroic deeds with her counterpointed tales of their family history. The movie, then, in its fidelity to the autobiographical 'war diary', is as reactionary as the book. Eastwood is, after all, politically conservative. Yet, as a director, he has made films that have rubbed salt in the wounds of contemporary America, such as *Gran Torino* and *A Perfect World*. Particularly significant in this sense are the two complementary films Eastwood has directed on World War II and in which, unlike *American Sniper*, the compassion for the Enemy prevails: *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*. The former is a 2006 release written by William Broyles, Jr. and Paul Haggis, the latter being one of the most prestigious script writers and himself a director (*Crash*). Based on the book written by James Bradley and Ron Powers, it portrays the battle of Iwo Jima from the perspective of the U.S. Marines. Eastwood also directed *Letters from Iwo Jima*, narrating the same battle from the point of view of the Japanese. The subject this time is based on the novel *Picture Letters from Commander in Chief* by Tadamichi Kuribayashi, and the film is shot almost entirely in Japanese, though it is a U.S. production that in the United States (as well as in Italy) was distributed with subtitles.

In *American Sniper*, however, the enemies are just shadows, like the 'red shadows' in John Ford's *Stagecoach*, where 'Indians' were the bad guys and the Northerners were good. Ford was conservative and right-wing, yet he made such films like *Grapes of Wrath*, based on Steinbeck's work, or like *Stagecoach* itself, one of those quintessential, classic westerns that we can now

also read as a critique of differences in class and social status and which is all but accidentally based on Maupassant's *Boule de Souif*. Like Ford, Eastwood is also a man of the right: registered as a Republican since 1951, he has always supported candidates from the right, from Eisenhower to Nixon, from Schwarzenegger to McCain. Yet he has managed to make films with deep social commentary and criticism of the war. How can this complexity be reconciled then with *American Sniper*'s narrative, which flattens on Kyle 'legend' and fully conforms to the myth of the 'Pax Americana'?

My impression is that the film transforms the autobiographical material into pure cinema, into a type of cinematography that in the new millennium is influenced by video games, special effects (the 'fireworks' mentioned by Laurent Juiller with reference to postmodern cinema), and by an effect of realism hiding a hyper-realistic background. *American Sniper* is a great feature film inscribed in a specific genre, to wit, that of the war movie, which today we may see as a sub-genre of the *Iraq movie*, the latter being closely connected to the already established tradition of the *Vietnam movie* (the intertextual echoes between the representations of the two American wars being too many to be overlooked). Eastwood moves the 'savages' mentioned by Kyle like zombies, like pure shapes in a huge video game that represents the contemporary collective unconscious, silhouettes that unrealistically always fall at the first shot, with the game's difficulty level increasing from time to time. A film of great aesthetic pleasure, once ideology has been left aside, as were the classic western films, before New Hollywood and New New Hollywood dismantled long-standing certainties with the reinterpretation of the American frontier in movies like *Blue Soldier* or *Little Big Man*, and later *Dances with Wolves*. But *American Sniper* is a film that may also contain a critique of the war system, as it describes the enterprises of Kyle and the other SEALs in such a detached manner, never emphasizing emotions – as if it were the work of a war reporter – as to somehow prevent the viewer from identifying with the main character.

Despite its presenting a concentration of American nationalism 'in its pure state', the movie stands beyond any ideological consideration as a chilling testimony for posterity. Eastwood's functional Iraq truly seems the 'real' Iraq ("the true story that inspired the film"), and finally a sense of anxiety emerges for an unnecessary war. The 'real' story of Kyle's death

– who after surviving a thousand fire fights is trivially killed by a fellow soldier – while hiding all the contradictions, the trauma, the real and psychological wounds of all American wars, spurs reflection. The director seems to throw in the episode without dramaturgically building it, but the undertone finale retrospectively charges the entire film with a paradoxical and ironic feel. The archival material included in the movie, with the final ‘real’ state funeral of the American sniper, is at any rate beautiful and relevant for our discussion.

A comparative analysis of the book and the film reveals how Kyle’s autobiography is a great repository of information that Eastwood mines for his creative ends. Relevant examples here are the whole chapter in which the sniper describes the paraphernalia he uses for his ‘work’: Springfield guns, body armor, the first aid kit, the GPS, the watch, etc. (“Sniper” 105-32); the training details (“Jackhammered” 25 and following); and the actions that contribute to building of the ‘legend’ of the Devil of Ramadi (292).

The wealth of information featured in these chapters is of utmost interest for a screenwriter and/or a director and has led to the movie’s meticulous reconstruction of the American war in Iraq. But in the hands of the director, this raw material becomes art. Take, for example, the film’s opening sequence, in which the protagonist kills a mother and a child who are about to throw a grenade at his fellow soldiers: in the book only the woman is killed (2-4), but in the diary description of the episode we already find the premises for the scene of the film: “I looked through the scope. The only people who were moving were the two, said the chief, man and maybe a child or two nearby ... As the Americans organized, the woman took something from beneath her clothes, and yanked at it. She’d set a grenade. I didn’t realize it at first ... ‘She’s got a grenade’ ... ‘Take a shot’ ‘But...’ ‘Shoot. Get the grenade. The Marines...’ I hesitated. Someone was trying to get the Marines on the radio, but we couldn’t reach them. They were coming down the street, heading toward the woman. ‘Shoot!’ said the chief. I pushed my finger against the trigger. The bullet leaped out. I shot. The grenade dropped. I fired again as the grenade blew up. It was the first time I’d killed anyone while I was on the sniper rifle. And the first time in Iraq – and the only time – I killed anyone other than

a male combatant” (3-4). It is a moment of such dramatic suspense that it deserves to be turned into a film.

In the next passage, the diary comments on the incident: “It was my duty to shoot, and I don’t regret it. The woman was already dead, I was just making sure she didn’t take any Marines with her. It was clear that not only she wanted to kill them, but she didn’t care about anybody else nearby who would have been blown up with the grenade or killed in the firefight. Children on the street, people in the houses, maybe *her* child...” This reference to the child becomes the pivotal element of the scene in the film, that also draws on another later passage of the book featuring the woman and the child. It is a fierce scene, because the pair of atypical ‘terrorists’ is somewhat heroic and fair, different from the hundreds of anonymous shadows that are swept away by Kyle’s cruel game. The child reappears later in the book: “Then it became a waiting game. The rocket was valuable to them. Sooner or later, I knew, someone would be sent to get it. I watched. It seemed like forever. Finally, a figure came down the street and scooped up the grenade launcher. It was a kid, a child. I had a clear view in my scope, but I didn’t fire. I wasn’t going to kill a child, innocent or not. I’d wait until the savage who put him up to it showed himself on the street” (386-87).

The film mixes then these two episodes and charges the sniper with considerable responsibility: he is not just a duty performer, but someone who has to make decisions and take his own responsibilities. As I said before, the movie relies on a close resemblance to video games. Eastwood indeed takes to its extreme an idea that is already clear in the book: “It started looking like a videogame – guys were falling off the rooftops” (384). A quite slippery ground separates the video game here from the action movie, which is in turn influenced by video games: “By this time, the blocks around us looked like the worst scenes in *Black Hawk Down*” (383). The metalinguistic reference to Ridley Scott’s film is interesting and allows us to interpret Eastwood’s film as presenting a certain degree of self-reflection.

The director looks at Kyle’s story with detachment, whereas in the novel the protagonist comes off as an exalted fanatic: “I got to the point where I had so many kills that I stepped back to let the other guys have

a few.” (387-88) “I killed all of them. I rolled over and said to one of the officers who’d come over, ‘You want a turn?’” (388). Whereas in Kyle’s book we find the obtuse cruelty of killing, Eastwood has a more disillusioned view of the war that ultimately becomes for him an exercise in style. This approach can be seen in one of the most beautiful scenes in the film, when the sniper kills his Iraqi sniper counterpart from a stellar distance. Here Eastwood mobilizes all the stereotypes of the ‘sophisticated postmodern cinema’: the bullet that so unrealistically, like the arrow of a Hollywood Robin Hood, follows its endless deadly path until it hits and kills the bad guy (incidentally, the enemies all fall dead the first time they’re shot. Just like in a video game, there is never a casualty).

In the book there are two references to the “long shot” (the play on words between the long rifle shot and the cinematic grammar long shot is made on purpose). One is in the photographic materials: “A close-up of my 338 Lapua, the rifle with which I killed from farther away. You can see on the side the plate with the parameters and settings needed for long distance targets. My shot at 1920 meters has exceeded the range expected by the plate, and I had to reset it by eye” (photographic materials, no page). The other narrative reference is in the paragraph called “Beach Balls and Long Shots,” where Kyle tells the story of three rebels (instead of the only great villain of the film) who appear on the shore up the river (204). “A few had tried that before, standing there, knowing that we wouldn’t shoot them, because they were so far away ... Apparently realizing they were safe, they began mocking us like a bunch of juvenile delinquents ... ‘Chris, you ain’t never gonna reach them’” – says a fellow soldier. Kyle takes the words as a challenge: “But 1,600 yards was so far away that my scope wouldn’t ever dial up the shooting solution. So I did a little mental calculation and adjusted my aim with the help of a tree behind one of the grinning insurgent idiots making fun of us. I took the shot. The moon, Earth, and stars were aligned. God blew on the bullet and I gut-shot the jackass” (204). God blew on the bullet: that line alone has so much cinema in it already, and there is much Eastwood as well: the gringo in Leone’s movies, the Korea veteran of Cimino’s *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, Don Siegel’s *Dirty Harry*, his own films as a director. There are also other references to long shots throughout: “As a hunter, I knew how to shoot, how to make

the bullet from point A to point B. Sniper school taught me the science behind it all” (120). This seems to me the best example of how Eastwood is apparently faithful to the beginning of the autobiography, while somehow ‘betraying’ it in the staging, thus turning a text of low ideological legacy into a visionary and pain-ridden work (well beyond the question of right/left opposing ideological stances), which showcases contemporary warfare in its purest form.

American Sniper is therefore a strange hybrid between exaltation and criticism of the American war, between documentary and fiction, constantly intertwining ‘true’ and ‘false’. It is, in any case, one of the most intense post-September 11 Hollywood war movies, contributing to a genre, that of post trauma cinema, which has by now been studied in its various forms. *American Sniper* is another “*cauchemar moderne*,” a modern nightmare, as Denys Corel defines the television series *24*, which has implications, at times disturbing, opening the door first on our personal imagination and then on that created by history. Zizek’s comments in a well known essay on September 11 are to the point: “Not only were the media bombarding us all the time with the talk about the terrorist threat; this threat was obviously libidinally invested.” (Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert* 15). Therefore, as a direct result, “the unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise ... It is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality.”(16). The philosopher criticizes the legitimization of violence (Zizek, “Jack Bauer”) and the process through which it is turned into something apparently normal for the mere fact of being openly acknowledged. Zizek’s reference is to Jack Bauer, the hero of *24* who, just like sniper Kyle, defends his country, his family, and justice.

In short, Eastwood’s film may be yet another case study for anyone looking at the relationship between Cinema and History. Marc Ferro’s groundbreaking study comes to mind, in which, among the first to do so, the author questioned the terms of this relationship: do we have to consider cinema as an ‘agent’ of history, that is, as a means that is able to intervene in the development (and/or contradictions) of society, or only as a ‘document’ of a certain age and social organization? Is the field of investigation limited to a film genre, or is the film as such, in one sense or another, history?

These are still valid questions that apply to our case study, which on the one hand ‘reflects’ (American and world) History, representing it in ways that are themselves significant contemporary historical processes; on the other hand, however, it is also an ‘agent’ of history, influencing the spectator’s perception of politics and ideology; it subverts messages and settled values, upsets the traditional categories of ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Also, poignantly relevant are the theoretical contributions by Pierre Sorlin,⁵ who moved from a substantial assumption about the ‘unreliability’ of history in the postmodern era: he analyzed the images bombarding for many nights the spectator from Serbia, which in turn harked back to those, terribly symbolic, of the Gulf War. The emblematic images of all contemporary wars cannot but make us think of the imaginary impulse of audio-visual media, and also reflect on contemporary cinema. Sorlin’s reflection on the media (*L’immagine e l’evento*) and especially on television, which together with Cinema ends up with ‘creating’ reality, went further, suggesting a sort of priority of the representation on the event itself. This brings us back to Baudrillard, who immediately after the first Iraq war launched his paradoxical slogan: “The Gulf War never existed.” The new millennium has come, tragically inaugurated by the great trauma of September 11, its first years marked by the enormous impact of that event on the audio-visual Imaginary. We have witnessed the explosion of digital technologies, with the full articulation of the videogames universe and its particular aesthetics bringing new life and new modalities to the representation of war. *American Sniper* is a paradigmatic case in point, with its evil partisans/terrorists being eliminated as in a video game. Television, through both news and dramas, contributes for its part to the process of creating a ‘reality’ that confuses the real with the imaginary. The war in the Balkans, for example, paradoxically turned a parodic film like *Wag the Dog* by Barry Levinson – in which, thanks to digital technology, the duo interpreted by De Niro and Hoffman stages a ‘virtual’ war in Albania to distract the public from the U.S. president’s sentimental affair. Here we have tangible evidence of how and to what degree cinema is sometimes capable of anticipating reality. A defining characteristic of Hollywood cinema has always been that of understanding, and anticipating, ongoing cultural and historical processes, rather than merely representing the conflicts that have already exploded

(from social contradictions to wars). Even more subtly, contemporary American television series capture the events before they find expression, sensing the political-social air, so that they currently represent the cutting edge phenomenon in cinematic language. These TV shows are often inspired by literary works. The latest sensation in this genre confirms this trend: *House of Cards*, a cult series with Kevin Spacey on palace intrigues in the White House created and produced by Beau Willimon, is in fact a rewriting of a television miniseries produced by the BBC, which is in turn based on a novel by Michael Dobbs. On another front of the adaptation from the 'literary' text is also *The Walking Dead*, another cult series created by director Frank Darabont, which is based on Robert Kirkman's comic book series by the same title. The latter example shows how, as we have seen at the beginning of this article, literature is no longer constituted only by written texts, but also comprises the enormous flow of words and images, including comics and graphic novels, that heavily influences contemporary cinema. The recent rise of new *pepla* (a contemporary version of the sandal epics so famous in the '50s and '60s) that are passed off as 'historical' films – from *Troy* by Wolfgang Petersen (but shouldn't we also say Homer?) to *Alexander* by Oliver Stone (a specialist in bio-pics), to television series such as *Rome* and *Spartacus* – further demonstrates how the notions and borders of history and literature need to be redefined, as does the Cinema, which has become a hybrid of videos, comics, advertising graphics, floating on the vast sea of images of the web.

Notes

¹ Among the most noteworthy recent studies on cinema we find two collections of essays, edited by Robert Rosenstone and Peter Rollins, respectively. The former, titled *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (1995), featured contributions on a diverse selection of movies, from *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (by Terence Davies, 1988), which is analyzed looking at issues of gender, memory, and the representation of the working class, to *Walker* (by Alex Cox, 1987), a historical parody that has drawn much attention in the U.S. by telling the story of a nineteenth-century American adventurer who becomes president of Nicaragua; from *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (by Alain Resnais, 1959) to *Mississippi Burning* (by Alan Parker, 1988). Also analyzed are the Italian films *La notte di San Lorenzo* (by Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, 1982) and *Dal polo all'equatore* (by Yervant

Gianikian and Angela Ricci-Lucchi, 1986). The latter is an interesting movie, which recovers with philological rigor the old documentaries of the film pioneer Luca Comerio, but also reworks the language of film and video. The second important contribution to the debate on cinema and history is the book edited by Rollins and titled *Hollywood as Historian* (1998), which collects a number of thought-provoking essays, ranging from the analysis of ideology and rhetoric in the documentaries of the New Deal to the discussion of the visual style of *The Grapes of Wrath*, from *Why We Fight* to *Dr. Strangelove* and *Apocalypse Now*. Finally, characterized by a markedly theoretical approach, we have essays like the one on the war films by Giuliana Muscio (1999) who, thanks to the attention given to the “codes” of self-censorship and her exploration of the archives of the majors, analyzes the ideological messages contained in Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* in relation to the American war film in general (Jones and McClure; Kagan; and Koppes and Black).

² My own involvement with the topic dates back to the mid-1990s, when I published “Novel-Film-Novel. Letteratura americana e cinema: andata e ritorno.”

³ About the *Vietnam movies* (which became a genre or a sub-genre), I refer to my own “Il ‘teatro’ della guerra. Lo sguardo del cinema hollywoodiano.”

⁴ A similar case is represented by *Zero Dark Thirty*, by the same director, though Bin Laden’s killing takes place in Pakistan.

⁵ Sorlin, *Film in History* (1980) and *Sociologia del cinema* (1979). On the relationship between film and history see also Gori, *La storia del cinema* (1994); Ortoleva, *Cinema e storia* (1991) and “Fabbriche dei sogni”(1986).

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