LOCATING THE OTHER IN AN ONLINE WORLD:

TROLLING ISLAM IN *AMERICAN SNIPER*

by

Tyler James Ready

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For GR, BR, JM, MW, SK, & the many other friends, family, and advisors that have supported me in this project.

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ABSTRACT

As the online realm continues to become more important in the United States, questions of identity become increasingly difficult to parse, while still remaining at the forefront of US political discussions. In seeking to understand how identity construction is intertwined with a text's online circulation, I've focused on Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* as an act of online trolling. In looking at articles written about the film, along with comments accompanying both the film and articles, I've found a pattern which centers on deeply-held orientalist beliefs about the Middle East. Additionally, the online circulation of these texts reveals a strawman-styled othering process in which rhetors, ranging from Eastwood himself to anonymous online contributors, define themselves not by what they believe, but by what they are not. Ultimately, this analysis exposes the paradoxical element of rhizomatic communities: in an online world, where there is often no discernable connection to a static, geographic place, users create their identities by denigrating perceived "other" ideologies. Instead of focusing on what makes them (in this case) American, users condemn the opposing political side, and then attribute all the remaining positive qualities to themselves.

ORIENTALIST TROLLING

Among other things, the 2016 presidential election reintroduced border ideology into the public conscious as the rhetoric of then-nominee Donald Trump utilized othering processes to garner support from a polarized and frustrated constituency. Continuing into his presidency, the topic of immigration and refugees remains at the forefront of his administration, with borders too factoring prominently into these discussions. For most of the US, borders epitomize the mundane, floating in the background of normality. Until they don't. And now, in a country whose borders have *always* been contentious, borders define public discourse and shape questions of what it means to be (US)American.

Trump's rhetoric, in terms of what it means to be American, relies less on defining qualities inherent in Americans than it does on who is not American, and in Muslims and Mexicans lie two "others" that serve as easily-identifiable scapegoats for all that is wrong with the USA. Trump's frequent admonishment of the evils of refugees and immigrants traces itself back to an orientalist ideology that Edward Said locates in an East/West binary that favors Western Europe and the US over the Middle East. Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* (2014) plays upon these ingrained ideas of American exceptionalism, brought about by a clever use of US and Iraqi settings that illustrate the former as an ideal and the latter as its ever-present antithesis. Within the story, Eastwood relies on this series of minor narrative borders to emphasize negative stereotypes of Islam, the likes of which Said noted in *Orientalism* and *Covering Islam.* Both the book and film post-date Jack G. Shaheen's *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11,*

but they fit quite well with the cringeworthy depictions of Arabs Shaheen finds throughout US media. The film itself is a heavily-modified version of the 2012 memoir by Navy SEAL sniper Chris Kyle and authors Scott McEwen and Jim DeFelice. In Eastwood's adaptation, Kyle epitomizes the type of righteous, gritty, determined American that Fredrick Jackson Turner celebrated in his frontier thesis,[1] though here Kyle finds himself trying to tame an even less hospitable Iraq. The film's narrative shifts between the horrendously violent urban warfare Kyle and his squad encounter (largely revolving around a fictionalized showdown between him and an Iraqi sniper named Mustafa) and a loving, but understandably-trying, marriage in the US. After defeating Mustafa and a horde of Iraqis in the film's climax, Kyle returns to the US for good, where he overcomes his PTSD by assisting other veterans. It's one of these struggling veterans who kills Kyle while at a shooting range, and the film ends with recorded footage of Kyle's real-life Texas funeral procession.[2]

That Hollywood utilizes questionable depictions of societal others is hardly revelatory, but in terms of critical commentary, scholars now foreground the circulation of texts, and by extension, how representations (in this case orientalist) move across borders. Where Gloria Anzaldúa draws upon a confluence of cultures rooted in physical place in examining identity, we now turn to how a text, rich in ideological weight, moves throughout various cultures. Brian T. Edwards, in particular, asks, "Why does it matter that we understand how cultural products circulate across borders and publics?" (16) and

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[1] See Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History 1893." *National Humanities Center*. 2005. Web.

[2] See Mike Spies's *Newsweek* article "Inside the tortured mind of Eddie Ray Routh, the man who killed American Sniper Chris Kyle."

goes on to note that US institutions had, and continue to have, a vested interest in the dissemination of American culture. Shaheen points to films as an influential form of cultural imperialism (xvii), though Edwards himself resists a simplified production-oriented view: "American culture, long popular globally and assumed to have a positive message or benefit to U.S. politics, is generally taken up by individuals in ways that detach the cultural product from its American referent and thereby shatter the presumption of their close relationship" (Century 1). My lack of Arabic renders me unqualified to examine how *American Sniper* circulates throughout Arab communities in the same way Edwards examines *Argo* (2012) in Iran (93), so instead, I turn to Kyle's narrative as it moves throughout a global *online* context, a world in which questions of identity become difficult to parse. For example, while I might safely assume that something like Breitbart receives more US views than Aljazeera, the fact that each of those pages (and everything in between) can be read by any number of diverse peoples in a variety of different locations renders statements about textual circulation in an online context – at least according to their corresponding geographic borders – pointless. What happens then, when we look at a film like *American Sniper*, a major Hollywood production with a budget of upwards of $50,000,000, that was nominated for six Academy Awards (and won for best sound editing) through the lens of one of the uniquely online constructs: trolling?

The classic orientalist spin of *American Sniper* has a long history of ancestors, but a new addition to this conversation engages the role of online communities in terms of the text's reception. Said was ahead of his time in noting that "one aspect of the

electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed" (Orientalism 26). Said wrote more than thirty years ago, and his analysis of cultural stereotyping grounded itself in a primarily one-way media stream: news institutions reported, the public listened, and the transaction, more or less, ended there. But what happens in the digital age when that same audience both creates content and dictates its creation? Enter the comment, an often forgotten and neglected subset of the "social media" moniker, and one which serves as particularly challenging to analyze due to its place (where, exactly *are* comments?) and production (who are these commenters?). Companies routinely find themselves wrestling with the comment for these reasons: in 2013, Disney's ESPN altered its comment section, requiring users to login with a Facebook account in hopes of curbing the rampant trolling. In the same year, *Popular Science* disabled comments on their website, a move Suzanne Labarre, their online content director, explained: "because comments sections tend to be a grotesque reflection of the media culture surrounding them, the cynical work of undermining bedrock scientific doctrine is now being done beneath our own stories, within a website devoted to championing science" (Labarre). In this way, a text's reception is never static, as it continually generates commentary while moving throughout an online world, and though we'll never know how much comments affected the production of articles that accompanied *American Sniper's* release, I think we would be remiss to say they had no effect. In *Reading the Comments: Likers, Haters, and Manipulators at the bottom of the Web,* Brian Reagle Jr. notes "there is a lot of dreck down there, but in sifting through the comments, we can learn much about ourselves and the ways that other people seek to

exploit the value of our social selves" (3). Even though comment sections are widely regarded as the place insight and intelligence go to die, the fact remains they *do* matter.

In *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture,* writing professor Whitney Phillips points to trolls as "the grimacing poster children for the socially networked world" (8). Trolling, it turns out, is more than just a pastime for juvenile troublemakers. It's a complicated and multi-faceted phenomenon that resists all-encompassing definitions, but Phillips cites Judith Donath as providing a useful starting place in viewing "trolling as a malicious and deliberately destructive *lie"* (16). Additionally, she references Claire Hardaker's take on trolls, "whose real intentions(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement" (qtd. in Phillips 17). Reagle Jr. suggests comments can be a viable option for societal insight, and an examination of trolling offers similar potential: trolling is "built from the same stuff as mainstream behaviors; the difference is that trolling is condemned, while ostensibly 'normal' behaviors are accepted as a given, if not actively celebrated" (Phillips 10). Viewing a movie like a troll might seem like a stretch, but it's appropriate here given that *American Sniper* actively seeks to portray Iraqis as blood-thirsty heathens. More importantly, to borrow from Phillips, "these malicious and disruptive lies" serve as the starting point for, and then frame, online conversations revolving around American identity and involving everything from the War in Iraq to Islam in general.

Reagle Jr., asks what we can find at the bottom of the web, and here the imagery of "trolling" proves instructive. A grotesque fairy-tale troll lurking under a bridge might

be an apt analogy for the racism hiding beneath *American Sniper's* patriotism, but I find the fishing connotation of trolling more illuminating. If both Phillips and Reagle Jr. are right, the "bites" *American Sniper* generates should be revealing, and indeed I think they are. Here, both the film and its accompanying online texts reveal a "grimacing poster child" for identity construction in a heavily mediated, non-place dependent online world. When deprived of a rooted, physical idea of identity and place, commenters employ a heightened sense of identity construction through a strawman-styled othering process, in much the same way *American Sniper* works to define US values, not so much be expressing them, but by clearly denoting the "other" values of Iraqis as deeply flawed.

The Texts

My print copy of *American Sniper* boasts itself as a #1 *New York Times* Bestseller, in addition to being "the autobiography of the most lethal sniper in U.S. military history." Initially, those statements sound remarkably benign, and little more than the basic advertising that accompanies any number of books or films. However, Gillian Whitlock's *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* offers guidance that might assist in reading this cover, suggesting memoirs are "the genre for those who are authorized and who have acquired cultural legitimacy and influence" (20). Under this aegis, those descriptors take on a decidedly different meaning. *Soft Weapons* centers its analysis on subaltern voices from areas like Iran, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and while a white Texan like Chris Kyle falls into a decidedly different category, it's worth asking what effect his authorization has, particularly when Whitlock points out that autobiography "can personalize and humanize categories of people whose experiences

are frequently unseen and unheard" (3). In this way, the film *does* humanize Kyle, but does so primarily through the dehumanization of his victims, and if being bullet sponges isn't quite enough, Iraqi characters literally have no voice in the movie: even with subtitles enabled, all that comes across on my DVD copy is "[SPEAKING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE]."

The lone example that might illustrate a potentially humanizing portrait of Iraqi life comes when the Butcher murders a child with an electric drill. The boy's father provided intelligence to US forces, and the Butcher takes it upon himself to exact punishment in the most inhumane way imaginable. This scene purposefully makes a strong emotional appeal in illustrating the catch-22 nature of Iraqi life. More insidiously though, it also subtly dehumanizes at the same time via what German Americanist Heike Paul finds in analyzing a component of the Pocahontas myth. In the 18th century, the story of Pocahontas was useful in that it allowed Europe to justify colonization, i.e., the mythologized version of Pocahontas illustrates a good native who seemingly embraces European conquest, in stark contrast to the other bloodthirsty natives who have yet to see the light of colonization (Paul 97-98). In Eastwood's film, this scene illustrates Iraqis are either barbarous beyond belief, or good people who try to help US soldiers, only to die at the hands of their nefarious counterparts. In this context, the only scene in *American Sniper* that might otherwise show a humanizing component of Iraqi civilian life really functions as a justification for occupation.

A large part of the trolling component comes from the film's generic ambiguity: the print version clearly falls into that of memoir, but the film alters the original

substantially, while still trafficking in the authenticity of an autobiography. Eastwood's production includes the line "Based on the book by CHRIS KYLE with SCOTT McEWEN AND JIM DeFELICE" in the closing credits, in an apparent acknowledgement of changes, but does so while "real" video from Kyle's funeral procession rolls. Additionally, Kyle's film antagonist, Mustafa, is the antithesis of all the good the US's deadliest sniper represents. Phillips refers to trolling as deliberative lies, and the act of crafting wholly new material (like the Mustafa storyline) for the movie must be viewed as intentionally provocative. And by extension, this should raise questions about why Kyle's voice is given a prominent place in US culture. Another curious point that emphasizes the purposeful trolling of *American Sniper* comes in Eastwood's alterations to Kyle's overtly racist commentary. Print Kyle explicitly explains his take on the evil in Iraq: "Savage, despicable evil. That's 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). He goes on to state that his only wish was that he could have killed more (5). However, while film Kyle refers to the evil in Iraq, he's largely benign in his statements. In fact, following his first on-screen kill, Kyle chastises a young soldier for expressing juvenile enthusiasm in a moment of excitement. His racism tempered in the film, his kills appear justified and that vindication comes from a moral authority that indicates the portrayals of Iraqis as savages has little to do with warped US perceptions, and more to do with the innate cruelty of Muslims.

The numerous differences between the print version of *American Sniper* and its film counterpart are interesting, not because they make Kyle's story better or worse, per

se, but because they illustrate the intentional nature of trolling. Any book-to-film adaptation brings up questions revolving around how directors work with their source, and in a sense, the director's job in manipulating the source material ends up affecting an audience's interpretation. For example, while reading a story, I'm allowed to imagine any number of different things about the characters and their actions. While authors include hints about how characters look, dress and speak (to name but a few), the nature of a printed text allows readers to construct those mental images as they see fit. In a film version, a large part of this audience work is gone, as the director chooses who will play the parts, how they will act, and a myriad of other things. Surely, Eastwood would need to alter and eliminate components of the story simply due to time constraints and the medium of film, but the substantive addition of the Mustafa storyline gives physical representation to the idea of that evil Arab other. Said speaks to the significance of this sort of representation in suggesting "representations have purposes, they are effective much of the time, they accomplish one or many tasks" (Orientalism 273). In depicting the central Iraqi characters in this way, and literally silencing everyone else, the film trolls its audience in generating controversy and conversation about these (mis)representations. In turn, the comments that surround online articles about Eastwood's film lack any sort of critical component that might mark a distinction between commentary *about* trolling and commentary that mirrors the original troll-like representation.

Eastwood's use of narrative borders, in which scenes rooted in Iraqi death and destruction butt up against scenes featuring the seemingly prosaic Kyle family, serves as another clever way to insinuate the barbarian-like nature of Iraqis. For instance, shortly

after Mustafa wins a sniper-showdown that allows the Butcher to murder an informant's child, the movie shifts back to San Diego and the birth of Chris and Taya's first child: Iraqi death followed by US life. The end result, which harkens back to the frustrations of Said, can be found in Jack Shaheen: "Filmmaking is political. Movies continuously transmit selected representations of reality to world citizens from Baghdad to Boston. Dehumanizing stereotypes emerging from cinema, TV, and other media help support government policies, enabling producers to more easily advance and solidify stereotypes" (xviii). Again, these scenes are fictional – yet appear in a work that maintains a sense of real-life authority – and they emphasize Eastwood's particular type of trolling in that anyone and everything not associated with a righteous America is depicted as savage.

Why Mustafa fights against an invasive coalition force or allies himself with a monster like the Butcher go unasked, and it's most certainly not by accident. In an updated 2003 preface to *Orientalism,* Said states, "In the demonization of an unknown enemy, for whom the label 'terrorist' serves the general purpose of keeping people stirred up and angry, media images command too much attention and can be exploited at times of crisis and insecurity of the kind that the post-9/11 period has produced" (xxvi). I find very little about *American Sniper* funny, yet the effort Eastwood takes to ignore any nuance involving why the US is in Iraq borders on the comical. Take for instance the scene that serves as a pivotal moment in Chris Kyle's life. Upon returning from a rodeo, he finds his girlfriend in bed with another man; a brief fight ensues, and while reflecting on a failed career as a cowboy and his now-terminated relationship, a breaking news account featuring the bombing of the US embassy in Kenya comes on the television.

While the news anchor points out that, "it is still unclear at this hour who our enemy is," Kyle mutters "look what they did to us," and the next scene sees him in a recruitment office. Maybe the forces responsible for that bombing are somehow involved with Iraq, or Afghanistan, or "terrorism," or the collapse of the Twin Towers,[3] which comes twelve minutes later, but it doesn't really matter. Kyle succinctly illustrates the film's entire perspective in his phrase "look what *they* did to *us*." Who they are, or why they are fighting not only don't matter, but Marc Lee, the only figure within the film who entertains a more nuanced notion, dies. And of course, following Lee's funeral, an angry Chris Kyle blames his friend's death on an interest in those questions. Whitlock suggests memoirs are for those who have accrued "cultural legitimacy and influence," which makes Kyle's voice particularly problematic. Certainly, the man is phenomenal at his job, which is killing others, but it's this same voice that paints Iraqis as terrorists and unequivocally states that questioning the validity of the US's mission in Iraq results in death. Whitlock also references memoirs as being a venue for unheard voices, and in a reversal of this, Kyle's narrative further silences objections to the US's 21st century imperialism.[4]

Criticisms of Kyle's reductive thinking should be tempered by what Stacy Peebles has to say about wartime binaries: "Creating order out of the chaos of war often necessitates many forms of binary thinking. If one does not define oneself against the enemy, for instance, one will not be an effective soldier – that is, one will not be able to

[3] They were. Al-Qaida claimed responsibility for both.
[4] This becomes an important component of online comments, in that detractors of the film are often accused of not supporting US troops.

kill. And that need for binaries creeps into other aspects of the soldier's experience and identity" (50). In a perfect world, war wouldn't exist, and Chris Kyle wouldn't have a best-selling memoir, but both of those are realities. Kyle is quite comfortable operating within these binaries, telling Taya early on that, "I just hope I can do my job when that day comes" when pressed on how he'll respond if there is ever a real person on the other end of his gun (obviously Iraqis don't count as real people). In critiquing these three US military memoirs, Peebles goes on to note that none "include an extended consideration of the political motivations and justifications for war in their narratives, and the absence is telling" (99). The nuances simply don't matter, and at one point Kyle offers a vague and clichéd sentiment involving protecting the US from some sort of terrorist bogeyman: "There's evil here. You've seen it" and then goes on to question whether doubters want this same evil to come to San Diego. The irony being that Kyle's justification for occupying Iraq is how horrible it would be if Iraq occupied the US. In short, he'll do whatever it takes to protect his country, but it's never quite clear what he's protecting it from.

Kyle avoids any conversation about the larger political issues surrounding the invasion of Iraq, and in this case, Eastwood sticks closely to the printed version, but his willingness to alter the texts substantially for his purposes makes the omission of this discussion curious when viewed in line with trolling, which Phillips suggests "highlight[s] the more ambivalent aspects of the dominant culture" (50). Here, *American Sniper* reveals how US culture criticizes violence, and uses the potential of violence for proactive measures awash in violence: Kyle suggesting his violence in Iraq is warranted

since it will stop violence from coming to the US. At the same time, the US is already saturated with violence; it's in movies and on TV, found throughout video games, and while boxing no longer holds the public eye like it once did, mixed martial arts (MMA) is essentially sanctioned street fighting. Violence seems to be acceptable when done for good, though some edgier TV shows like *Game of Thrones* subvert this in frequently subjecting good characters to extreme acts of violence. In terms of the ambivalent aspects of the dominant culture, *American Sniper* underscores the US's paradoxical views on violence, and in doing so, it also calls into question a continued US cultural trope that uses an "othering" of Iraqis to emphasize and galvanize US patriotism. In its most basic sense, *American Sniper* is the story of a morally righteous man, intent on killing as many Muslims as possible. Regardless of the controversies and discussions that surrounded the film upon its release, that its box-office performance would be so stellar speaks volumes to the US mindset regarding violence: it's acceptable and worthy of celebration when directed towards the right people.

Circulations and Comments

The borders that separate Iraq from the US within the film are exceedingly clear. Iraq is dirty, evil, and violent, and the US prosaic, though if we're to believe Kyle, constantly in danger of being overrun by evil. This simplicity runs counter to Neil Campbell's ideas of rhizomatic constructs, which require "acknowledging that boundaries between places (and identities) have become less clear, blurred by a postmodern, transnational, global age of travel, digital communication, multinational corporations, and various complex mobilities" (24). Questions of identity and ideology

should be rhizomatic, yet in online communities, these boundaries are often reduced to simplistic us-versus-them ideologies and feature conversations that, when distilled down to their most basic elements, reveal the need for convenient othering. Analyzing these communities presents a number of problems though, many of which Phillips wrestles with in analyzing trolls. To start, ascertaining the identities of trolls and their motivations is problematic, as anonymity is one of the foundational principles of the trolling subculture.[5] Furthermore, in situations where Phillips, who clearly identifies herself as a researcher, develops online relationships with trolls, she can never be certain if their admissions are honest or examples of trolls being trolls (42). In the end, comments pose a similar version of Phillips's problem:

> After six years, dozens of interviews, and thousands of hours of participant observation, I have every indication that the vast majority of subcultural trolls – certainly the ones I interacted with – are relatively privileged white males for whom English is either a first or second language. And yet in terms of hard evidence, there isn't much to present. (42) [6]

Phillips opts to focus instead on "cultural – as opposed to individual – pathologies, and the ways in which trolling behaviors replicate and are imbricated in existing ideological systems" (43). That holds true for my discussion on comments too, as I'm more interested in what they might reveal about a mainstream US culture. After all, if one of

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[5] Comments are also occasionally deleted, and whether a user can determine if a comment was deleted varies by site. Additionally, most comment platforms feature an option to display the "most popular" comments, and how the platform determines that is something not available to the average user.

[6] Since I'm viewing *American Sniper* as an act of trolling, and the majority of comments are reminiscent of Phillips's statements about trolling, I use masculine pronouns when referring to commenters whose names are gender-neutral.

the defining elements of trolling is the response the act receives, examining the online response is vital in discussing *American Sniper*.

My research into comments is not as extensive as Phillips, but aside from the standard finding of online discussions quickly devolving into insult-fueled arguments, there appears to be a trend towards what I am calling the MAST (Muslim = Arab = savage = terrorist) trope. Here, commenters engage in the continually problematic move in assuming that all Muslims are Arabs and all Arabs are Muslim, and then referencing some sort of fringe group to highlight savagery; this allows users to eventually arrive in a place where all Muslims/Arabs are terrorists. While I'm keenly aware of the problems of binary thinking, the reception of this film tends towards partisan lines, and both of those sides seem more interested in ridiculing the perceived ideological and political other, as opposed to addressing any elements of the film or book. Reagle, Jr., reminds us that "insight and wisdom might not always be found at the bottom half of the Web, but it does have a sample of what people are thinking, right or wrong, offensive or trite" (172) and more importantly, "comment is with us, and we must find ways to use it effectively" (185). In addition to revealing the ambivalent aspects of a US culture, online communities illustrate identity construction through a type of strawman othering, in much the same way the film reduces the Iraqi Other to its stereotypical form in an effort to highlight the greatness of Chris Kyle, and by extension America.

Comment sections lack any sense of context, and in likening online trolls to the trickster figure, Phillips points out the "trickster's behavior demands polysemy – he doesn't tell the audience what to make of his actions. He acts, he leaves, and suddenly

there is nothing. Suddenly it's the audience's job to figure things out" (9). In analyzing both the film and comments, one is left with only the presented text and must decide how much *assumed* context is necessary for understanding. For example, one of the commenters on an Aljazeera article goes by the name of BushAdmirer. I can make any number of assumptions about BushAdmirer as a rhetor based on his name, but I have only his comments to work with. It's highly doubtful that username on Aljazeera's website is incidental, but I'm left to make my own assumptions, and in that sense, whatever conclusion I arrive at is, in a sense, projecting my own biases upon an empty name.

Even discussions about whether the film is pro/anti-war become problematic quickly, despite the fact those terms are used frequently in the online world (at least by the writers of online reviews and articles). Is a film like *American Sniper,* which uses Kyle's proficiency at killing as a cause for celebration but also places a large emphasis on the psychological trauma and relational strain he goes through, still a celebration of war? In a *Daily Beast* article by Asawin Suebsaeng titled "Oscar-Nominated 'American Sniper' Made Joe Biden Cry," but more tellingly subtitled "'It's intense man,' the vice president said after watching the film. Meanwhile Bradley Cooper *responds to lefty, anti-war criticism* of Clint Eastwood's film about a 'hate-filled killer,'" Suebsaeng implies the type of either/or mentality that persists throughout the comment sections: right-leaning consumers like the movie (apparently pro-war) and left-leaning people dislike it (anti-war). Suebsaeng goes on to quote Cooper extensively, but sums it up in saying, "Cooper then expressed hope that *American Sniper* not be viewed strictly as an Iraq War movie,

but as a more ‘universal examination of warriors and their family lives.” In framing Cooper’s words as a response “to lefty, anti-war criticism,” Suebsaeng erroneously assumes that any criticism of the film implies being against war, and by extension – and this is the important part – also against US troops. Suebsaeng’s article suggest the film is pro-war and conservative, given that detractors line up in the “lefty, anti-war camp,” but couldn’t the film also be read as anti-war simply because it portrays the effect it has on US soldiers? John Nolte of Breitbart calls the film patriotic, at least in large part because it can “make us feel both the righteousness of justified violence and the heavy emotional price paid by those committing it” (Nolte). He goes on to suggest the important takeaway lies in the emotional toll Kyle’s tours cause him, which was what Bradley Copper seemed to be getting at in his interview. Furthermore, Nolte ends by saying

> American Sniper is not only a cinematic masterpiece. It is proof of what Big Hollywood has been arguing for more than 6 years: That you can tell the truth about American and the terrorists and the War On Terror and the incredible men who fight and die for us in a way that is both emotionally complex, patriotic, heartbreaking, and rousing. You can also make hundreds of millions of dollars in the process.

The binaries become muddled here: is the movie pro-war because it portrays the emotional sacrifice of US soldiers and their families or because a lot of the bad guys get killed? When put under a critical lens, the ubiquitous pro/anti descriptors hold very little meaning. They’re thrown around with reckless abandon, but done so in a manner in which they’re almost always used to describe the horrible other ideology, and then the meanings *don’t* actually matter, it’s just something bad.

Comments are not enabled for Suebsaeng’s article, but the ones found at the bottom of Nolte’s review focus primarily on Eastwood as a director. The most widely

liked comment, featuring 114 upvotes and spawning an all-encompassing thread (47 different responses) comes from user DebbW_winning and reads as follows: “Thank you. The libs/anti-war people were tearing up this film at IMBd the other day. 8 pages of anti-war nonsense. I look forward to seeing this film. Clint Eastwood is a master storyteller. I waited years to see Gran Torino, and it was better than 90% of the garbage Hollywood puts out” (Appendix, Fig. 10). It still isn’t clear what being “pro-war” entails, but in the following thread, all things Hollywood are disparaged, and there’s a lengthy series of sophomoric insults leveled at Michael Moore (seemingly a stand-in for the left-leaning Hollywood). Curiously though, in a *Rolling Stone* article by Matt Taibbi, titled “American Sniper is Almost Too Dumb to Criticize. Almost,” he criticizes Eastwood for producing more Hollywood garbage. Thus, in some cases Eastwood illustrates everything Hollywood *could* be if they weren’t so liberal and in other cases showcases just how vacuous Hollywood is. Eastwood’s Hollywood connotation highlights how various commenters and writers loosely use descriptors, embodied in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Jason1978, comment on Nolte, John. "'American Sniper' Review: A Patriotic, Pro-War On Terror Masterpiece." Breitbart. Breitbart, 16 Jan. 2015. Accessed 24 Jan. 2017.

I'll admit that part of this issue might stem from a strangely-hyphenated title, but the point remains that both detractors and champions of the film seem to fixate on A) whether it's pro or anti-war, B) which side can lay claim to the film, and C) when (or if) those terms are positive or negative. I'm not even certain what an anti-war film would look like, given this conversation. My guess would be that it would look something like *American Sniper*, but with the roles reversed and Mustafa being celebrated as a heroic warrior, but even then, criticisms of that film would likely end up in it being deemed anti-American.[7] At this point, both terms are best viewed, at least in this context, as empty-signifiers: everyone uses them, but they lack any actual meaning. Additionally, they function like actual trolls, in that what really matters is the response.

[7] Rosa Brooks examines how the US military has become synonymous with the US in general in *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything.* While she offers suggestions about how and why this happened, I'm content to accept it as a given.

One of the major criticisms of the film involves its over-simplified portrayals of Iraqis as evil or helpless. The dreck, as Reagle Jr. puts it, found at the bottom of articles often encapsulates this same component, but in a variety of ways. In taking a complicated issue like the Iraq War and reducing it to the simplest of concepts, Eastwood seems to have spawned an entire community that responds to his troll in an equally trollish manner.

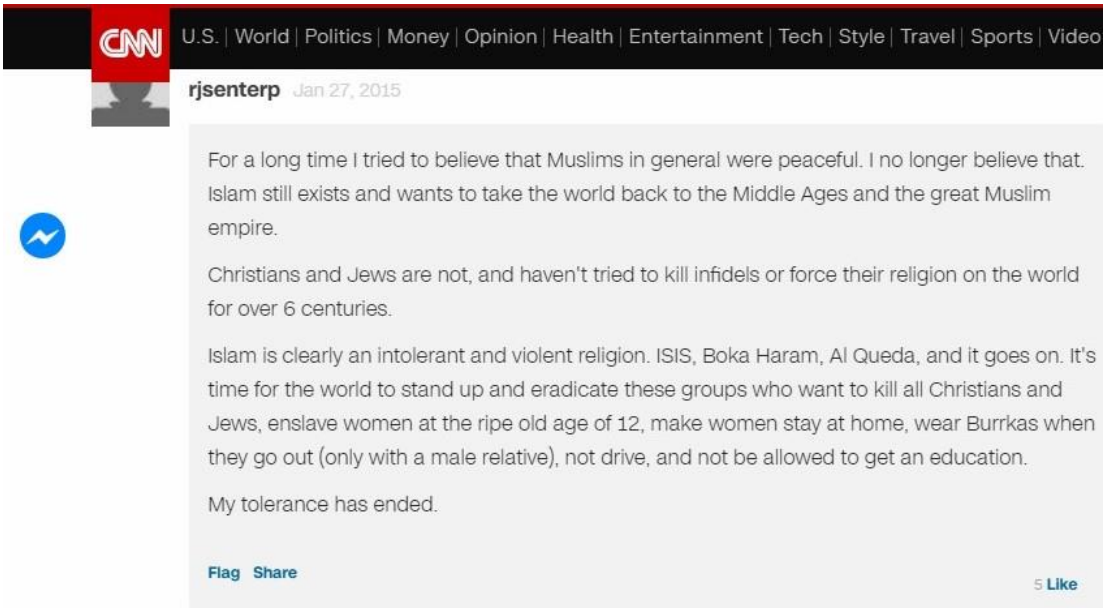

Figure 2. Rjsenterp, comment on Obeidallah, Dean. "'American Sniper' a Powerful Anti-war Film." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 27 Jan. 2015. Accessed 24 Jan. 2017.

Here, Rjsenterp illustrates the MAST trope, in that he has no qualms assigning characteristics present in a few to a diverse religious population spread throughout the entire globe and numbering well over a billion. He asserts that he once had favorable views of Muslims, but no longer does, implying that Islam or its followers have done something to alter his outlook. What exactly spawned this change isn't of importance, but

what does matter is that Islam is a violent and horrible religion, illustrated by the extremist splinter sects he cites. This mentality persists throughout comments sections following articles involving the Middle East or Islam in that users equate Islam with the likes of ISIS, Boka Haram, and Al-Qaeda and makes it easier to support a Muslim = savage trope.

The movie itself received generally positive reviews from a cinematic standpoint. Critics often noted the performances of both Bradly Cooper and Siena Miller as deserving of praise, and indeed, the longest thread following John Nolte's Brietbart review centers on Eastwood as an incredible director and master storyteller. I'm not well versed enough in acting to comment on the praise heaped upon Miller and Cooper, but the way in which Eastwood cuts between Iraq and the US is particularly interesting: those geographic shifts call attention towards positive US messages like family, (good) religion,[8] and relationships. Eastwood's explicit use of setting works its way into the conversations surrounding the film as well, particularly here, as it relates to user Uncletravy's comment (Figure 3).

[8] The film's opening scene includes an Islamic call to prayer, followed by a mother urging her child to blow himself up in an attack on US forces. Within the next ten minutes, the geographic and temporal setting shifts to a young Kyle sitting in church, and later using those values to defend his helpless brother from a schoolyard bully.

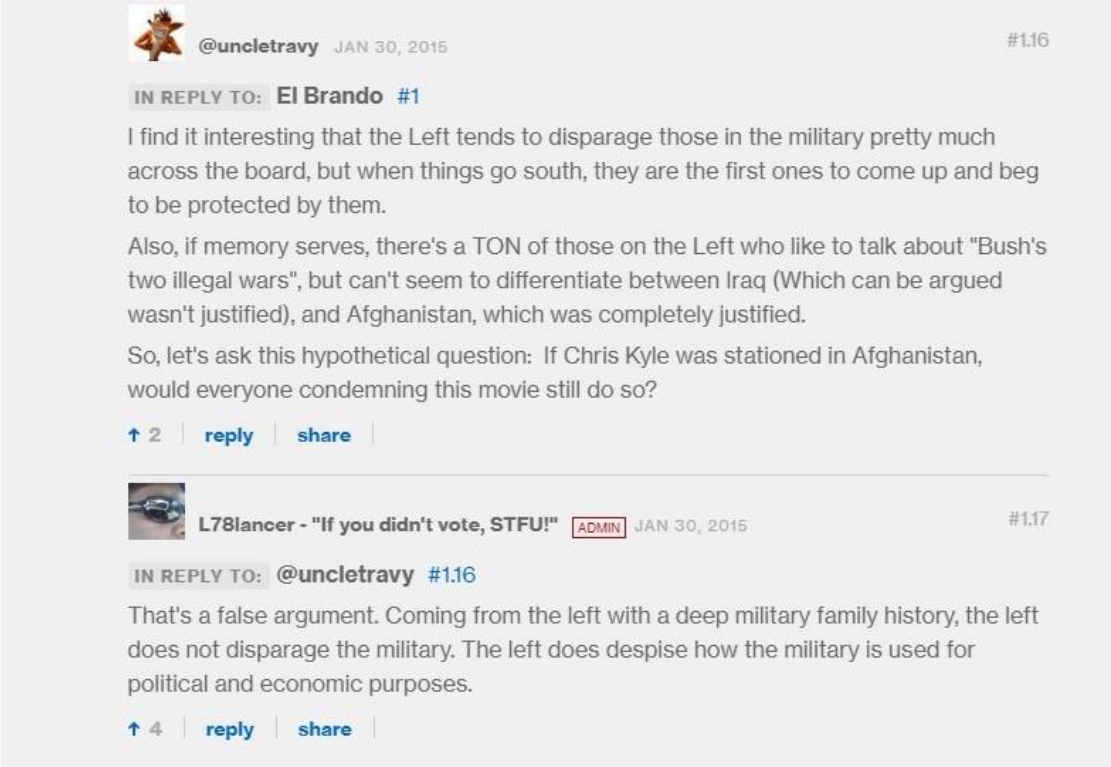

Figure 3. Uncletravy, comment on Howard, Adam. "Taking Aim at the 'American Sniper' Phenomenon." *MSNBC*. NBCUniversal News Group, 30 Jan. 2015. Accessed 24 Jan. 2017.

The specific language used by Uncletravy is telling for a few different reasons. First, he makes it 100% clear that invading Afghanistan was justified, and while initially it sounds like he acknowledges the faulty reasoning in invading Iraq, he does so in a way that leaves room for doubt. After all, "can be argued" isn't nearly as strong as "completely justified." Eastwood's filmmaking suggests there may have been a connection between Iraq and 9/11 too, even though there has never been any credible evidence to support the claim. Derek Gregory ridicules this in examining the terror rhetoric that came out of a post-9/11 Washington DC, a rhetoric that quietly and quickly lumped Afghanistan and Iraq together, even though "the connection between the Islamicist al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein's secular Ba'athist regime was stupefyingly

opaque: bin Laden's immediate response to Iraq's occupation of Kuwait had been to offer to raise an army of *mujaheddin* to repel the invaders" (51). In Eastwood's production, once the Twin Towers fall, the film moves to Iraq in less than three minutes (an interlude includes Chris and Taya's wedding), and a voice greets the audience: "Welcome to Falluja. The New Wild West in the Old Middle East."

I wonder how much current conversations involving terrorism in the Middle East is viewed as a continuation of 9/11, as the film suggests, as opposed to being a result of the US's actions post-9/11. Furthermore, the content of the movie positions itself so that US forces are responding to terrorism that *just is*, and as a result, online conversations that do address extremism do so from a standpoint that often assumes the Middle East to be inherently volatile and chaotic, forgoing any conversation involving foreign involvement. The other point worth mentioning in this exchange (Figure 3), via L78lancer – "If you didn't vote, STFU!" centers on the difficulty in divorcing criticism of US military policy from perceptions of individual soldiers. Uncletravy orients his position not in terms of what he believes, but by creating a strawman that his political other believes. While L78lancer points out the flaw in this mindset, doing so does little in the way of addressing the more problematic part of the comment.

That exchange, while brief, illustrates one of the problems inherent in conversations regarding the film: how do you criticize something doused in patriotism? In his *New Yorker* review, "'American Sniper' takes apart the myth of the American Warrior," Richard Brody examines the emotional turmoil created through Cooper's performance of Chris Kyle:

> Yet the movie doesn't convey a sense of whitewash. Rather, Eastwood reduces Chris's situation to its most elemental and shows that, even under optimal circumstances, with completely dedicated and professional fighting forces operating under political premises that they believe in – even if the Iraq War were to pass moral muster as a just war and political muster as a necessary one – it would be equally destructive to the soldiers who wage it. And the fact that this war doesn't pass either test is, for Eastwood, a political damnation of the very first order.

Brody's insight into the film sounds good, but in trying so hard to illustrate the emotional distress of US soliders, the focus inevitably shifts from asking those moral and political questions to ones centered around the emotional state of an occupying force. And indeed, the failings of the US government in handling veterans should be brought forth, and the difficulties soldiers face in returning to civilian life should be forced upon an all-too-often politically apathetic, yet patriotic USA.[9] In this sense, Kyle's murder by another veteran should be front and center, but it's tacked on at the end, and presents itself to an audience awash in uber-patriotism via a full-orchestra version of "Taps." I think Uncletravy's question of "if Chris Kyle was stationed in Afghanistan, would everyone condemning the movie still do so?" is simultaneously very interesting, but dangerously misguided: that conversations exist where wars are sometimes justified but other times not is, to borrow a word from Gregory, stupefying.

Uncletravy introduces his comment by making sweeping generalizations about "the Left," and while part of the difficulty in analyzing comments stems from their anonymity, another problem lies in the fact that criticisms of the film are often riddled with insults aimed loosely at the former Bush administration, and by extension, those

[9] Ben Fountain uses this phenomenon as the premise for his satirical 2012 *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk.*

who associate with the Republican party. Matt Taibbi's op-ed on *American Sniper*, "American Sniper is Almost Too Dumb to Criticize. Almost" illustrates this perfectly. Taibbi makes some insightful points, noting that "it *always* looks bad when you criticize a solider for doing what he's told. It's equally dangerous to be seduced by the pathos and drama of the individual soldier's experience, because most wars are about something much larger than that, too" and pointing out the US seems ready for movies about this particular war, but only movies that focus on how hard things are for our guys. That said, his list of insults that don't directly relate to the film is quite lengthy. He ridicules Eastwood as a stand-in for Hollywood in producing a film "with the nutritional value of a fortune cookie that serves up a neatly-arranged helping of cheers and tears for target audiences, and panics at the thought of embracing more than one or two ideas at any time," which is similar to his take on *Forrest Gump* turning the complicated Vietnam War into "a movie about a platitude-spewing doofus with leg braces who in the face of terrible moral choices eats chocolates and plays Ping-Pong." And according to Taibbi, the only thing dumber than a celebratory character study set in the mess of Iraq is how George Bush and Dick Cheney got the country involved in the first place. *Rolling Stone* allows readers to select the "best comments," and in scrolling through whatever algorithm RS uses to determine "best," it's clear there are a variety of voices, yet the comments tend to follow a few traditional patterns, illustrated by Figure 4 and Figure 5. A film that so clearly goes out of its way to mark clear boundaries between good (us) and bad (them) seems to invite this type of thinking, both in terms of professional and citizen commentary.

Brad · 2 years ago

This movie is basically straight-up pornography for a large swath of mostly overweight middle aged men. Many of them dodged service in the Vietnam era, then enthusiastically supported sending me and my brothers and sisters in arms off on our ridiculous misadventure in Iraq. If you're wondering, they're the ones in this comment section whining about "liberals" and not understanding the difference between an editorial and a review.

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Figure 4. Brad, comment on Taibbi, Matt. "'American Sniper' Is Almost Too Dumb to Criticize." *Rolling Stone*. Rolling Stone, 21 Jan. 2015. Accessed 24 Jan. 2017.

Chris Holloway · 2 years ago

It's sad that Chris Kyle, and any other American soldier sacrifice their lives physically, mentally, and emotionally so that ignorant people like this critc, Seth Rogan, and Michael Moore can sit on top of their soapbox and throw stones at things they know nothing about. Also, if this person knows so much about movies, and is such an expert, why is he "just a critic?" Not a director/producer/writer, that's right, because you have no idea what a good movie is.

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Figure 5. Chris, comment on Taibbi, Matt. "'American Sniper' Is Almost Too Dumb to Criticize." *Rolling Stone*. Rolling Stone, 21 Jan. 2015. Accessed 24 Jan. 2017.

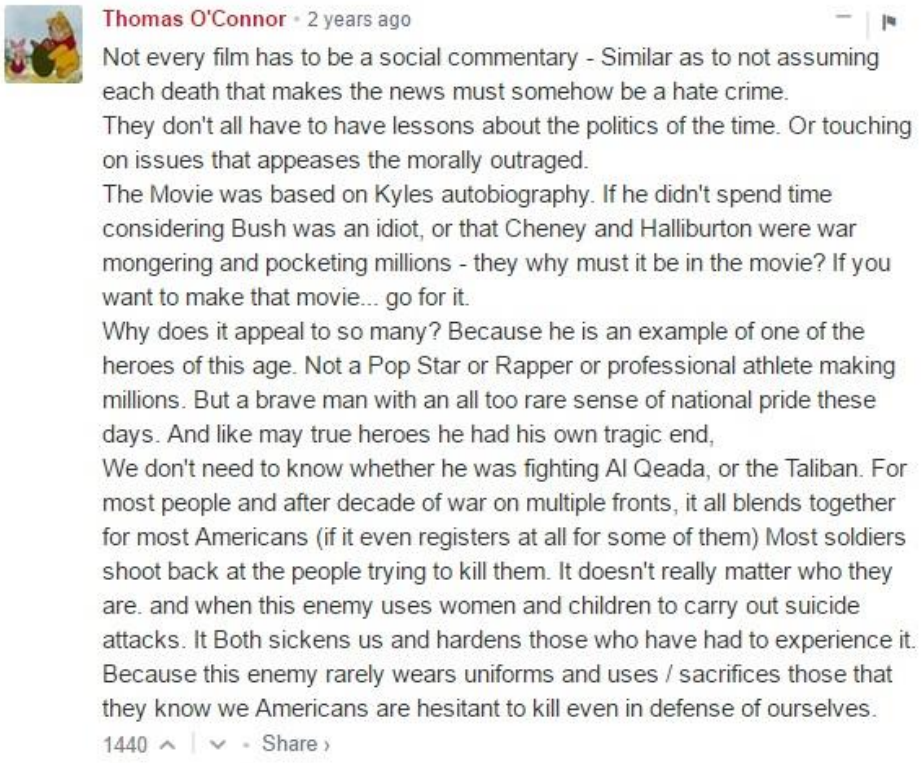


Figure 6. Thomas, comment on Taibbi, Matt. "'American Sniper' Is Almost Too Dumb to Criticize." *Rolling Stone*. Rolling Stone, 21 Jan. 2015. Accessed 24 Jan. 2017.

There are no follow-up messages to O'Connor (Figure 6), but I hope he appreciates the irony in saying *American Sniper* shouldn't be viewed as social commentary when it's spawned hundreds of articles and hundreds of thousands of comments. His very own comment was upvoted 1440 times! If nothing else, the online circulation of texts like *American Sniper* help illustrate the falsehoods in artists of all kinds saying their work isn't political. Regardless, since *American Sniper* underwent a number of content/plot changes from book to film, asking why a glorified showdown between Kyle and Mustafa was created but commentary on the invasion itself was omitted is *extraordinarily* relevant, regardless of what the O'Connors of the world claim. I would suggest the answer to this lies in a combination of trolling being purposeful and

heavily-dependent on its reception, and thus, by painting all things Muslim with an orientalist brush, Eastwood ensures a loud reception for his film. More alarmingly though is O'Connor's comment that "we don't need to know whether he was fighting Al-Qeada, or the Taliban. For most people and after decade of war on multiple fronts, it all blends together for most Americans." Liking and upvoting systems in comment sections leave a lot to be desired, and there is no way to tell what those 1440 respondents thought was worthy of praise, but if only a portion have no interest in who American soldiers kill, that is cause for concern. And again, this goes back to the film's depiction of Iraqis as embodying no discernable qualities other than extreme savagery.[10] For Eastwood, it really doesn't matter who Kyle is killing. They're all the same, and they're all evil.

[10] In addition to silencing Iraqis which requires an audience to rely on Eastwood's trollish depictions, the two central Iraqi characters, the Butcher and Mustafa, are either savage beyond belief (willing to kill a child with an electric drill) or supportive of such savagery (Mustafa keeps US forces pinned down while the Butcher publicly murders the child). The only plot-related scene in which an Iraqi is helpful involves a man who invites Kyle and his squad into his home to share a Ramadan meal. But this scene too illustrates negative aspects of Iraqis, as the man has been hiding weapons used by Mustafa and the Butcher. After being discovered and coerced into helping the Americans gain entry to the Butcher's hideout, he is killed when he picks up a weapon in support of the terrorists once the shooting begins.

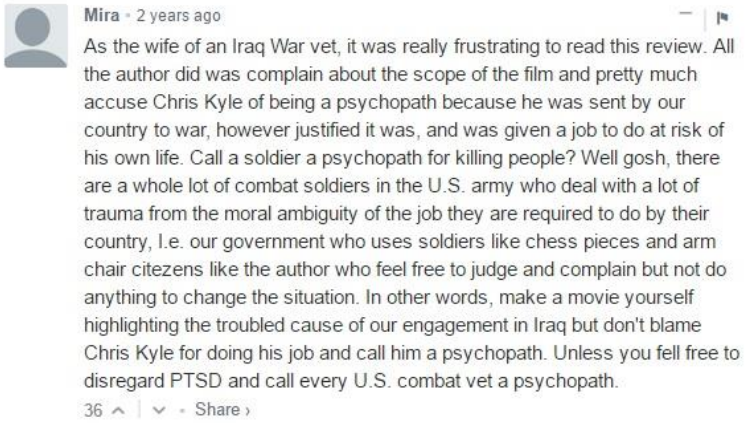
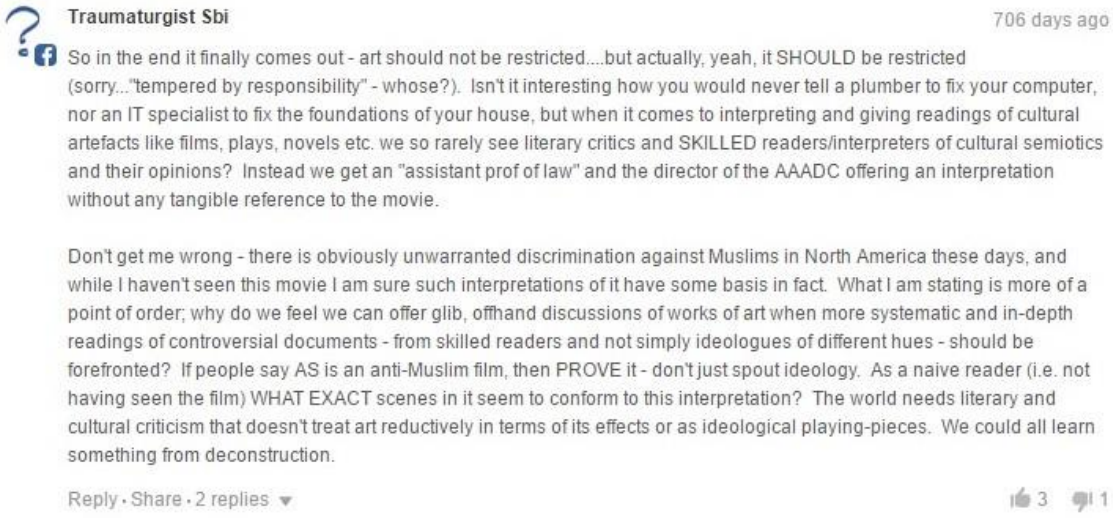


Figure 7. Mira, comment on Taibbi, Matt. "'American Sniper' Is Almost Too Dumb to Criticize." *Rolling Stone*. Rolling Stone, 21 Jan. 2015. Accessed 24 Jan. 2017.

The final comment I'd like to address in Taibbi's article comes from Mira (Figure 7), and while I sympathize with her position as a wife of an Iraq War veteran, her comment poses problems for a number of reasons. The film purposefully avoids any sense of moral ambiguity. Those who produced the *American Sniper* texts, be they book publishers or movie producers, sell the notion of a truthful account that comes from a position of authority, and that makes the clear distinctions between good (us) and bad (them) all the more relevant. In the film, a commander even states that evacuation orders were given, so anyone found in the city is an enemy. This brief, but clever scene eliminates any questions of morality, as the only two forces in this geographic space are the bad Iraqis and the good US soldiers. The rest of Mira's comment devolves into a familiar rant that makes absurd leaps in logic, but her frustration illustrates the difficulty in saying anything non-celebratory about representations of US servicemen and women. At least in part, I suspect this comes via association, as online commentary critical of the film tends to contain an element of mockery found in the likes of Figure 4.

Batman and the Joker

The MAST trope tends to be in the periphery of these discussions, both in how people endorse it and in how people refute it. Most comments critical of the film say so by attacking the "other" political side and neglect to address this trope. Comments supportive of the film either ignore this component entirely and focus on things like Cooper's performance or Eastwood's story-telling, or outright agree with the trope, but again, the emphasis seems to be on denigrating the perceived other. Thus, any meaningful discussion about these portrayals is quickly lost in a swirl of insults and strawmen. In the comments of one of the more critical articles, Khaled A Beydoun and Abed Ayoub's Aljazeera English article "Hollywood shoots Arabs: The Movie," user Traumaturgist Sbi offers an observation that partially explains this phenomenon.



Traumaturgist Sbi 706 days ago

So in the end it finally comes out - art should not be restricted....but actually, yeah, it SHOULD be restricted (sorry..."tempered by responsibility" - whose?). Isn't it interesting how you would never tell a plumber to fix your computer, nor an IT specialist to fix the foundations of your house, but when it comes to interpreting and giving readings of cultural artefacts like films, plays, novels etc. we so rarely see literary critics and SKILLED readers/interpreters of cultural semiotics and their opinions? Instead we get an "assistant prof of law" and the director of the AAADC offering an interpretation without any tangible reference to the movie.

Don't get me wrong - there is obviously unwarranted discrimination against Muslims in North America these days, and while I haven't seen this movie I am sure such interpretations of it have some basis in fact. What I am stating is more of a point of order; why do we feel we can offer glib, offhand discussions of works of art when more systematic and in-depth readings of controversial documents - from skilled readers and not simply ideologues of different hues - should be forefronted? If people say AS is an anti-Muslim film, then PROVE it - don't just spout ideology. As a naive reader (i.e. not having seen the film) WHAT EXACT scenes in it seem to conform to this interpretation? The world needs literary and cultural criticism that doesn't treat art reductively in terms of its effects or as ideological playing-pieces. We could all learn something from deconstruction.

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Figure 8. Traumaturgist, comment on Beydoun, Khaled A., and Abed Ayoub. "Hollywood Shoots Arabs: The Movie." *Al Jazeera English.* Al Jazeera Media Network, 25 Jan. 2015. Accessed 24 Jan. 2017.

The fact that so many people speak about the film but offer little interpretation, other than banal partisan spins, resonates, and highlights the nature of online communities with a high degree of anonymity. People are simply more interested in ripping apart what the other side (allegedly) believes. In this sense, his comment reflects my issue with Kyle's narrative trafficking in the credibility associated with the memoir: the wrong voice shapes the discussion. Kyle's place of prominence and prestige allow a warped view of the Iraq War to weave its way throughout the online discourse. In turn, commenters follow suit in lining up in either/or responses to the film, forgoing any detailed analysis.[11]

While there might still be hope for skilled interpretations of cultural artifacts, most of what comes at the bottom of the web is of a decidedly different hue. For example, in attempting to explain the complexities of centuries of conflict, user Sith Lord offers the following analogy in response to Obeidallah's CNN article: "Have you ever seen 'The Dark Knight?' Think of the conversation between the Joker and Batman, wherin the Joker exposes Batman's weakness by confronting him with the limits of what he'll do. Imagine Muslims are the Joker, and the rest of the world is Batman" (Appendix, Fig. 11) Equating well over a billion people with the wanton violence and destruction of the Joker *and* championing the US in its ever-evolving quest to improve the world is an apt analogy for what the film does, trolling nature and all. On one hand, Sith Lord's comment is inane to the nth degree, yet on the other, it carries a fair degree of insight into

[11] One cannot read online comments without an ear for the unintended irony of posters, and it's fitting that Traumaturgist Sbi criticizes the authors for not being qualified to speak about the film when he himself has not seen it.

both what *American Sniper* does as an act of trolling, and also how the US's role in global affairs is portrayed throughout a lot of media. In *The Dark Knight,* the Joker's penchant for chaos just is, and that chaotic streak is woven into his very being in the same way *American Sniper* and its surrounding discourse reinforce the notion the people Kyle shoots are simply evil.

What is more pertinent about this comment is that *American Sniper* needs those two sides to function. The film's sense of evil that we're never quite sure about requires a force as noble and just as Kyle and his fellow SEALs to stop it. The online circulation of this text requires oppositional forces too, in that by portraying the other in such a negative way, whatever positive attributes are left are ascribed to the commenter. Lines are drawn in a very partisan fashion; there really isn't much surprise in what one finds reading through the comments on Brietbart – curiously enough though, comments on places like MSNBC and Aljazeera seem to be substantially more contentious. The political other enters as a reliable stand-in for everything that is wrong with society: conservatives are stupid, racist, warmongers, and liberals are whiny, wimpy, and hate America. Perspective matters, and one of the issues with *American Sniper* is that it's told from a perspective the silences Iraqi voices and purports to be a "true" narrative about a contentious war. We're the good, heroic Americans doing our best to overcome the evil and insidious Arabs/Muslims/Iraqis (not us). The comment threads end up perpetuating the same sort of over-simplified analysis that might be a critique of the movie itself.

After reading countless comments, I'm inclined to agree with the research Reagle Jr., noted, in that insightful commentary is seldom rewarded.

Figure 9. Unionconchck, comment on Taibbi, Matt. "'American Sniper' Is Almost Too Dumb to Criticize." *Rolling Stone.* Rolling Stone, 21 Jan. 2015. Accessed 24 Jan. 2017.

Goldschmidt's statement is spot-on: actual discussions seldom happen in these threads because commenters respond with insults instead of engaging in dialogue, ostensibly the purpose of commenting. In that sense, *American Sniper* succeeds in trolling by generating extensive discourse that fails to accomplish anything, but in the process garners an assortment of likes, upvotes and ticket sales. The comments found in the reviews, partisan sources or not, illustrate the same type of ideology that *American Sniper* does: outright refusal to engage in discussions about complicated topics. Phillips views trolling as a useful mirror that highlights the negative elements of media, and both *American Sniper* and its resulting discussion follow suit, revealing a penchant for cheap othering processes and blind patriotism.

Analyzing the online circulation of *American Sniper* is deeply rhizomatic, and in a strange way, interrogating such a community reveals problems inherent with rhizomatic

frameworks themselves: how does one talk about this type of circulation when everything is in flux and nothing is rooted? In seeking to adapt to paradigms that de-emphasize any sense of static geographic place, the rhizome paradoxically illustrates the importance of those fixed places, particularly when it comes to questions of identity. Krista Comer argues for a type of critical regionalism dependent on place: "without the specificity of that local site, there is not a critical global; the critical local is where bodies are in place, where they fight" (218). But there is no local site when entertaining online circulations, and while there is no shortage of scholarship on the complexities inherent in place, ideas like the critical local and critical global disappear once texts shift to an online world and rhetors become detached from a geographic place. What is left then, is a series of empty signifiers that suggest in the absence of place, ideology and identity generate from othering conceptions that focus on ideological strawmen. If Phillips and Reagle Jr. suggest that trolling and comments can be insightful in understanding culture, here they reveal an online culture interested in the dehumanization of Others (after all, *American Sniper* has been wildly successful) and defining itself not based on beliefs, but by what is left once a convenient other has been dismantled.

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APPENDIX

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

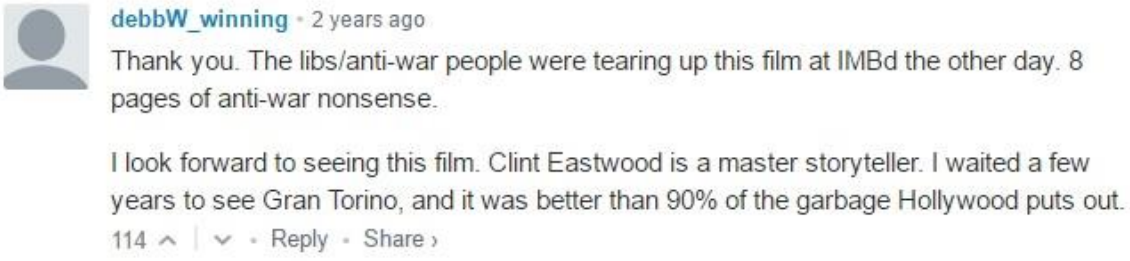

Figure 10. DebbW_winning, comment on Nolte, John. "'American Sniper' Review: A Patriotic, Pro-War On Terror Masterpiece." *Breitbart*, Breitbart, 16 Jan. 2015. Accessed 24 Jan. 2017.

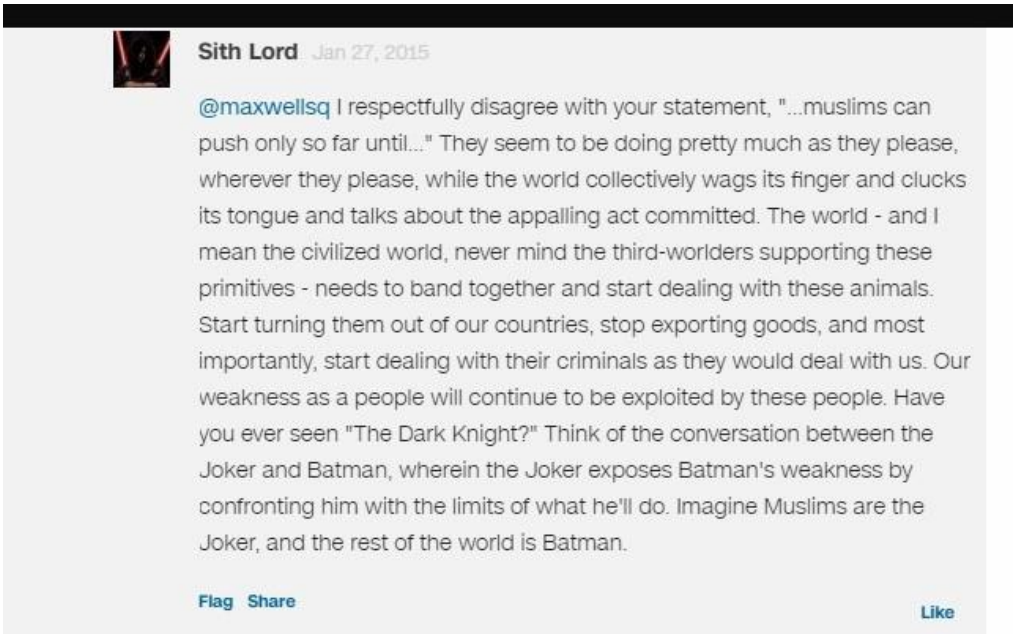

Figure 11. Sith Lord, comment on Obeidallah, Dean. "'American Sniper' a Powerful Anti-War Film." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 27 Jan. 2015. Accessed 24 Jan. 2017.