Exorcising the Ghost - or Spectres of Bin Laden

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Abstract | The article examines *Zero Dark Thirty* as a narrative treatment of a traumatic moment of crisis. The article proposes perspectives on a narrative logic and the means by which this logic is executed. It does so by using Derrida's notion of spectrality as demonstrated in his readings of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as well as his analysis of archival spectrality (Derrida, 2006 and Derrida, 1995). This Derridean perspective allows us to see the movie as an attempt to confront the horrors of crisis and bring the ensuing disequilibrium back into balance. This process, however, entails a complicated negotiation of spectrality that aims to preserve one's own ghostlike state while giving the enemy's various spectral forms a body so that he may be properly laid in earth.

Keywords | crisis, trauma, spectrality, 9/11, ghosts, redemption, prevention, closure

As Aristotle was kind enough to teach us – since we would never have figured it out otherwise – every narrative whole has a beginning, middle and an end (1995: 55). Heidegger thus demonstrated dry wit when summing up the Aristotelian biography in parodic fashion: "He was born, he worked, and he died" (Safranski, 1999: 1). The movie *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012) demonstrates a less humorous and much more troubling version of this trisection by presenting us with death, a search, and then death again. A death searching for another death. The opening of a wound, the search for a remedy, and the healing of the wound. Trauma, treatment, atonement. Crisis, coercion, closure.

The present article examines *Zero Dark Thirty* as a narrative treatment of a traumatic moment of crisis. The article proposes perspectives on a narrative logic and the means by which this logic is executed. It does so by using Derrida's notion of spectrality as demonstrated in his readings of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as well as his

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Issue 1 (2013): Crisicism – The Cultural Discourse of Crisis
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analysis of archival spectrality (Derrida, 2006 and Derrida, 1995). This Derridean perspective allows us to see the movie as an attempt to confront the horrors of crisis and bring the ensuing disequilibrium back into balance. This process, however, entails a complicated negotiation of spectrality that aims to preserve one's own ghostlike state while giving the enemy's various spectral forms a body so that he may be properly laid in earth.

"Actual events"

Zero Dark Thirty is preceded by silence. The obligatory paratextual logo sequences of different production companies appear without a sound: Columbia Pictures, Annapurna Pictures. A silent corporate introduction followed by the assurance that we are about to witness something true: "The following motion picture is based on first hand accounts of actual events". Actual reality as seen by actual people. But this statement of actuality invites suspicion. It announces that the movie is not fiction by stating that it is a narrative based on other people's narratives. It is a recounting of the "actual events" as they have been retold during the screenwriter Mark Boal's interviews with various participating officials. The movie is a recounting of the recounting of "actuality". And as such – a narrative based on a narrative based on "something real" – actuality has undergone several instances of narrative strategy.

Zero Dark Thirty admits its narrative construction but still claims a privileged "first hand" relation to "what actually happened". As Žižek once underlined, however, the claim that the facts themselves speak through the narrative should make us pause: "'Let the facts speak for themselves' is perhaps the arch-statement of ideology - the point being, precisely, that facts never 'speak for themselves' but are always made to speak by a network of discursive devices" (1994: 11). The present article questions spectrality as a discursive device employed by narrative strategy to make the "actual events" speak.

The stamp of veracity disappears, a second of dark silence and then we hear sound: recorded voices from actual victims of 9/11. They call their loved ones and 911. One wonders if the date 9/11 was chosen so as to forever remind people calling that emergency phone number of this moment of absolute powerlessness. The 9/11 voices cry out in terror, call for help, or communicate their love. This, of course, is horrible. It is pure horror. We are confronted with utter despair and the knowledge that these people died soon after. The movie opens with the ghostly voices of dead people crying

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out for a help that could not come – it is a moment forced to its crisis and the lingering reverberations still audible to us.

This narrative beginning introduces crisis and its still open wound, trauma. Etymology allows us to define a moment of *crisis* as an event separating (Gr: *krinein*) that which was from that which is to come. The horror of the sounds emanating from silence is the presence of absence. The fragmented sounds without image evoke nothing but that which is no longer and the lingering pain of its disappearance. Within the narrative logic of *Zero Dark Thirty*, this is the beginning, the crisis of the traumatic origin. The voices are preceded by nothing, by silent darkness, and they are themselves unable to take a form any more substantial than an echo. The present absence of the voices calls for a narrative to give them substance and meaning.

In determining crisis as a temporal separation, the encounter with the moment of crisis can be further described in relation to the lacanian conception of the aristotelian *tuché* (Gr: chance, fortune) or, in this case, *dustuchia* (Gr: literally "bad fortune"). For Lacan, *tuché* is "*the encounter with the real*" (1978: 53), it is the shattering of the symbolic world as we know it by the manifestation of the lacanian real. The real is impossible to imagine and resists all symbolisation so in the encounter of *tuché*, the real manifests itself in the form of the unassimilable: trauma.[1]

Trauma is the reaction to a world-shattering encounter beyond representation and it is only via the obsessive attempts to penetrate this representative opacity that the encounter, *tuché*, is constituted as trauma after the fact (Lacan, 1978: 129). Trauma inaugurates behavioural patterns that seek to come to terms with the inassimilable event, patterns that often constitute an illness "as an attempt at a cure, an endeavour to reconcile the divided Ego – divided by the trauma – with the rest and to unite it into a strong whole that will be fit to cope with the outer world" (Freud, 1939: 125).

The initial echo, the lingering of that which is absent, the horror of the unassimilable encounter with the impossible real, launches the narrative logic of *Zero Dark Thirty* as such an attempt at a cure. It reminds us that, although the traumatic wound has gained a certain amount of scar tissue through the "neutralizing,

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[1] "The function of the *tuché*, of the real as encounter (…) first presented itself in the history of psycho-analysis in a form that was in itself already enough to arouse our attention, that of the trauma" (Lacan, 1978: 55). Trauma is a term with many meanings and usages. "In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth, 1991: 181). Caruth relies on Figley (1985) for a more thorough discussion of the concept of trauma.

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deadening, distancing" (Derrida, 2003: 87) effects of incessantly repeated television images, the wound is still there and it still hurts.[2] The opening of *Zero Dark Thirty* insists on the traumatic urgency of the encounter and launches the search for a presence yet to be found behind the all too present absence of the victims: the attempt at penetrating the opaque, absent presence of the culprit.

Hamlet and spectrality

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* opens on a similar crisis, a ghostly calling somewhat analogous to the one in *Zero Dark Thirty*. The guards at the royal castle of Elsinore have summoned Horatio, the scholar and Hamlet's friend, to witness the phenomenon of a ghostly (re-)apparition. The ghost appears and Horatio engages it: "If thou art privy to thy country's fate, / Which, happily, foreknowing may avoid, / O speak; (...)" (1.1.131-38).[3]

The ghost refuses to speak to Horatio but speaks to Hamlet. It tells of a "foul and most unnatural murder" that must be revenged and before exiting, the ghost enjoins Hamlet to "Remember me" and to "Swear!".

Acknowledging the crisis of his encounter with the ghost of his father and his own role in handling it, Hamlet then utters the famous words: "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right" (1.5.196-97).

These two encounters with the ghost, those of Horatio and Hamlet respectively, articulate a double temporality: Horatio seeks foreknowing in order to avoid catastrophe, while Hamlet seeks revenge. One seeks prevention, the other seeks redemption.

The dead rise and speak, the time is out of joint, and order must be restored – "set right" – by revenging the crime and preventing future catastrophe. The task of restoring order falls upon Hamlet as the son and heir, it is his heritage. This seems to be the shared point of departure of *Hamlet* and *Zero Dark Thirty*: the initial crisis – the separation of what was from what is to come, a situation "out of joint" – assumes its traumatic character and forces the narrative logic between beginning and end to abide by this initial ghostly enjoinment, this heritage.

Derrida famously analysed this ghostly enjoinment of *Hamlet* in his book *Specters of Marx*, in which the notion of *spectrality* describes the lingering effects of

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the traumatic event, the way in which it continues to work or operate: "There is also a mode of production of the phantom, itself a phantomatic mode of production. As in the work of mourning, after a trauma, the conjuration has to make sure that the dead will not come back" (2006: 120).[4] This work of mourning is the identifying of bodily remains and localising of the dead, the making present of that which remains, the need to know "who" and "where" (Derrida, 2006: 9). It is the work to assimilate the unassimilable traumatic event.

As we shall see, the double temporality of the work of mourning – redemption and prevention – as manifested in *Hamlet* are the same two axes dominating *Zero Dark Thirty*. As we know, in *Hamlet*, revenge is had but the nation is lost. *Zero Dark Thirty* claims to win on both fronts. In both narratives, nonetheless, vengeful redemption is a certain responsibility inherited from the ghostly voices of the past calling from the future, into the future, calling for future revenge, it is a call from the "future-to-come".[5] Prevention is the attempt to avoid the return of the ghost, that the ghostly apparition may repeat itself. Revenge wants to silence past voices and their calling from the future into the future, while prevention hopes to close the possibility of any future ghostly calling.

Zero Dark Thirty's brief beginning of ghostly voices is immediately and abruptly followed by the search to obtain the presence of absent culprits – the search for terrorists and especially one terrorist, Osama bin Laden. The search consists of two parts that make up the first two hours of the movie: torture and tradecraft. In the first part, torture follows torture as the CIA agents try to substantiate their one real lead. During this process, the movie's main character, Maya, goes from being a torture novice – a disciple of the master, Daniel – to a torture master of her own whose methods clearly echo those of Daniel.[6] In the second part, torture is no longer accepted by the political establishment and the agents engage in a game of spy tradecraft with the enemy. As we shall see, both torture and tradecraft are essentially,

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[4] In the present article, "spectrality" is used as an analytical tool to describe the lingering traumatic effects of the encounter with the Other (the part of reality that resists symbolisation), both in the event of crisis and in the encounter with the Other of the other. "Spectrality" is not posited as an indisputable ontological category but the critical discussion of its fundamental ontological structure is left to others. For a clear description of spectrality in relation to ideology, cf. Žižek (1994: 20–21). For a both broader and more in depth discussion of spectrality in relation with the *Specters of Marx*, cf. Derrida et al (2008).

[5] "Future-to-come" is the English translation of the French "à-venir" which stresses the future, "avenir", as advent, that which is always already to come.

[6] These are fictional or, rather, composite characters that embody several different participants of the actual events. Maya is clearly stated as a fiction in that "Maya" is Sanskrit for "illusion".

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and in their different ways, a game of ghosts. These two preliminary parts conclude in the actual incursion to kill bin Laden.

Torture

The search initially focuses on interrogations under torture or, as it was called, "Enhanced Interrogation Techniques".[7] In *Zero Dark Thirty*, people are tortured for two reasons: 1. to get information about the perpetrators of 9/11 so that they be brought to justice; and 2. to prevent potential future perpetrators from ever attacking the US again. Redemption and prevention. This is the double ghostly temporality of the crisis instigated by 9/11.

The torture master, Daniel, lays out the rules: "If you don't look at me when I talk to you, I hurt you. If you step off this mat, I hurt you. If you lie to me, I'm gonna hurt you. Now look at me". Later on, yet another rule is added: "Partial information is treated as a lie". The whole truth and nothing but the truth…

The rules establish a situation where the torture master is the sole object of attention, where the tortured body must stay in its designated place, and where the tortured body must answer questions with a fullness that seems impossible. One is reminded of Blanchot's critique of torture, that it searches for an informational fullness that simply is not there, and never can be:

> Torture is the recourse to violence — always in the form of a technique — with a view to making speak. This violence, perfected or camouflaged by technique, wants one to speak, wants speech. Which speech? Not the speech of violence — unspeaking, false through and through, logically the only one it can hope to obtain — but a true speech, free and pure of all violence. (1993: 42–43)

Daniel has truly perfected and camouflaged his violent technique; he is like a virtuoso of torture. He holds a well rehearsed repertoire of reactions for any possible action from the detainee: no hesitation, he shifts between physical violence, humiliation and kindness like a master pianist in a Beethoven sonata going from a crescendo to a subito piano with no mediating decrescendo or diminuendo. There is a tactical move for any contingency. And this is also the camouflage of violence.

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[7] The term "enhanced interrogation techniques" was used by the CIA as well as the US Justice Department, cf. e.g. Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General Steven G. Bradbury's Memo to John A. Rizzo,
Senior Deputy General Counsel (CIA): "You have asked us to address whether certain 'enhanced interrogation techniques' employed by the Central Intelligence Agency ("CIA") in the interrogation of high value al Qaeda detainees are consistent with United States obligations under Article 16 of the United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (…)" (Bradbury, 2005: 1).

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Violence camouflaged as rational necessity. The violent acts are only a tool. Daniel is not presented as a violent guy. He is no thug; he is quite to the contrary depicted as a very rational and even rather nice guy. He smilingly shares his ice cream with pet monkeys in a cage, which somehow seems intended to demonstrate an ability to care. Violence is but a meticulously applied rational tactic for obtaining a specific goal. The movie even mentions his PhD in order to assure us that he knows what he is doing.

The cruelty of torture is performed as a seemingly rational, technical means to the end of making the body reveal its secrets. In the end, however, violent virtuosity fails. During a specific interrogation regarding the time of a possibly imminent attack, Daniel keeps pushing and finally puts the detainee, Ammar, in a closed wooden box. Here, violence seeking true speech free of constraints receives nothing but a weak muttering of random weekdays. The body is quite clearly broken, but breaking it, splitting it open, reveals no secrets inside. When the attack actually occurs on May 29, 2004 in Khobar Saudi Arabia, Daniel acknowledges that he and Maya failed to get the relevant information from Ammar.

Torture's failure to obtain true speech is a result of the detainee's spectral character. Ammar is quite clearly a ghost, a spectral incorporation of something that remains elusive, a body as the presumed container of some unknown piece of vital information.[8] Daniel pretends that spectrality has already been fully exorcised of Ammar's body: "I want you to understand that I know you, that I've been studying you for a very long time". But his almost desperate listening to Ammar's weak listing of weekdays proves that Ammar is not really there to be known. But the problem is why? Is he merely disguised as a ghost, hidden behind a lie, is he a technically manufactured ghost, literally out of joint by the effects of torture, only partially there as the object of Daniel's conjuring of someone already departed? This must be a question inherent to any interrogation.

In *Hamlet*, the guards have seen the ghost but they dare not engage it. Thus, they call upon Horatio to speak to the ghost: "Thou art a scholar, speak to it, Horatio" (1.1.44). Daniel, the PhD, the scholar, takes the role of Horatio in *Zero Dark Thirty*:

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[8] The particularly paradoxical character of the detainee has been analysed in several important ways. Cf. e.g. "They are something less than human, and yet – somehow – they assume a human form. They represent, as it were, an equivocation of the human, which forms the basis for some of the skepticism about the applicability of legal entitlements and protections" (Butler, 2004: 74) and "Neither prisoners nor persons accused, but simply 'detainees;' they are the object of a pure de facto rule, of a detention that is indefinite not only in the temporal sense but in its very nature as well, since it is entirely removed from the law and from judicial oversight. The only thing to which it could possibly be compared is the legal situation of the Jews in the Nazi *Lager* [camps], who, along with their citizenship, had lost every legal identity, but at least retained their identity as Jews" (Agamben, 2005: 3–4).

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"By heaven, I charge thee speak". The ghost exits and Marcellus exclaims: "'Tis gone and will not answer" (1.1.52 & 54-55). Ammar's breaking and muttering of weekday names is a horrifying mirroring of this exchange between Horatio and the ghost. Horatio charges the ghost to stay and speak, but in the end, the ghost is gone and will not answer. Only the body remains as an empty shell.

But our Daniel/Horatio is himself a ghost. The opposition between Daniel and Ammar in the torture chamber exposes two ghostly figures. Like the king's ghost in *Hamlet,* Daniel is clad in armour. It covers him from head to foot. His perfected technique of torture not only camouflages violence as rational behaviour, it also obscures Daniel's own spectral body. Daniel is only there in the spectral technical construction of this violent scholar supposed to speak to ghosts. This is the visor effect. It is the spectral asymmetry that allows Daniel to see without being seen, it is the look that is impossible to cross, the look that delivers the injunction (Derrida, 2006: 6–7). This further develops the paradox invoked by Blanchot, where violence demands a speech free from violence, in that Daniel enjoins Ammar to look at him. But how can he? Daniel is not there to be seen.

The visor effect is almost explicitly visualised at several points in the movie. Daniel's assistants all wear masks. Maya initially wears a mask but quickly realises the necessity to master the mask of technical violence, the visor, worn with such virtuosity by Daniel. By refusing the mask, she accepts the mark of generations as she accepts to inherit Daniel's position and abilities as torture master. Daniel's technical mask does carry a mark of its supplementarity, however, in that he wears his beard when in torture mode. Once back in Washington, the beard is off. No doubt Washington has other fashions when it comes to armour. By insisting on the technical supplementarity of violence, the proposition of the movie seems to be that, at least for a while, it is possible to "be yourself", to still "be a nice and rational guy" underneath the technical supplement of violence.

Maya starts out revolted yet convinced of the necessity of torture, but soon lets go of her reservations and dons the visor. Daniel starts out relentless but ends up disenchanted. Ammar does not give any useable information under torture but torture is what enables them to trick him into thinking that in fact he did. They let him believe that in a sleep-deprived amnesia he already gave vital information and thus, thinking that his spectrality has finally been exorcised leaving him with an all too fragile body, he elaborates on that truthful speech that never crossed his lips.

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We see several detainees giving information under torture and one called Ghul quite clearly states: "I have no wish to be tortured again. Ask me a question, I will answer it". From the investigators' standpoint, this is the perfect detainee: the one who gives up his spectrality before the body's breaking point. He states his willingness to speak a speech free of violence and to the audience it is almost a relief to hear such un-ghostly conversation. He seems depicted as the one who, after the experience of torture, decided to no longer be a ghost – an instance of *Zero Dark Thirty*'s claim that the "actual events", true speech free of violence, are there to be found behind its ghostly resistance to representation.

This is a crucial aspect of the narrative strategy of *Zero Dark Thirty*: the ghost will always be exorcised eventually; in most cases, it even wants to be exorcised. Ammar seems relieved to be free from possession, as does Ghul. As in a horror movie the possessed body is distorted and revolting but regains its human dignity after the exorcism. The spectral body is out of joint and wants to be restored, to return to human equilibrium.

From torture to tradecraft

The critical moment for the movie's depiction of torture arrives with the capture of Abu Faraj al-Libbi on May 2, 2005. After waterboarding and force-feeding, no technical means are able to make Faraj talk about the two things that matter: the location of Bin Laden and that of his alleged courier, Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti. Daniel, the torture master and scholar, has nothing left to give: "I've just seen too many guys naked. It's gotta be over a hundred at this point. I need to go do something normal for a while". By giving up on torture, Daniel is once more depicted as a rational person behind a technical visor. By admitting the effects of the supplement – the armour of technical violence – on the "actual" person behind the visor, the movie yet again affirms the possibility of decency behind violence if you shed your armour in time.

Daniel is getting out of the torture game and advises his former disciple that the political winds are turning. This turning of the winds began with the Detainee Treatment Act of December 30, 2005 and the ensuing political polemics culminating with Barack Obama denouncing unapproved interrogation tactics on January 22, 2009.

At this point, when the detainee program has lost political favour, enter George Wright, the movie's Chief of the Afghanistan Pakistan Department. He gives an angry

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speech reminding the team of their responsibility for the vengeance of the victims and the need to give the enemy ghosts a body: "We have twenty leadership names and we've only eliminated four of them. I want targets. Do your fucking jobs. Bring me people to kill". The inherited work of mourning: identify and localise. Find bodies to inhabit the ghostly names, and then kill them. Torture tried to make the body speak, torture's exorcism sought to rid the detainee of his spectrality in order to find true speech in a true body. This is no longer an option and George's demand for a real body applies to the absent body, the one yet to be found, not to make it speak but to kill it.

This shift from torture to tradecraft is a crisis within the narrative. However, instead of crisis as the impossible encounter with the real, *tuché*, this is a crisis within *tuché*'s complementary concept: *automaton* – the insistence of the network of signifiers, the symbolic construction of a causal world through the symptom as a repetitive behavioural pattern, the illness as attempt at a cure (Lacan, 1978: 52, 54). This crisis within the repetitive symptomatic patterns of the *automaton*, the ways in which the missed encounter of the *tuché* is continuously manifested within the attempts at assimilating the inassimilable, separates what was – the scholarly technics of torture – from what is to come: a new apparatus of knowledge – tradecraft.

During this crisis, there are no leads and bin Laden's actual presence is perceived as impossible: a report of bin Laden going to a feast in Bangkok evokes the response "was Tupac there too?". Chief of Station, Pakistan Joseph Bradley shouts at Maya: "No one has even talked to bin Laden in four years: he's out of the game, he may well even be dead but you know what you're doing? You're chasing a ghost (…)!". Indeed, Maya's hunt appears as an illness, "as an attempt at a cure", which becomes quite clear when another agent asks Maya: "(…) if bin Laden is at the end of this rainbow (…)".

Human error and the spectrality of the archive

The torture section of the film yielded one part of crucial information. When tricked into thinking that he had already given up his ghostly dissimulations, Ammar names Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, the alleged courier and link to bin Laden.

Interestingly, the persistent absence of Abu Ahmed is what makes him such a convincing lead. Everybody has seen or heard of him but he is able to remain spectral – "one of the disappeared ones". Faraj only withheld information about Abu Ahmed

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and bin Laden. The very fact that Faraj denied having heard of Abu Ahmed is seen as proof of Abu Ahmed's existence and importance. He truly is a phantom. All this ends, however, when a detainee testifies that he buried Abu Ahmed with his own hands in 2001. The ghost, apparently, is already dead and its body is already laid in earth.

The crisis within the *automaton* can only give way to tradecraft when the archive[9] gives Abu Ahmed a new body. Maya is handed the file on a certain Ibrahim Sayeed who turns out to be Abu Ahmed. When complaining that she did not have this information five years ago: "Nobody saw it, most likely. There was a lot of white noise after 9/11, countries wanting to help out, we got millions of tips and... Things got lost in the shuffle. Human error".

Abu Ahmed got lost in the white noise of the archive. He was forgotten. The fault is not just forgetting him, it is in the forgetting itself. When the king enjoins Hamlet "Remember me", remembering is inheriting. Forgetting is a betrayal that will cause the ghost to walk on. The voices in the beginning of *Zero Dark Thirty* cry out to remind us, to be remembered.[10]

Abu Ahmed disappeared because of human error in handling the technicalities of the archive. The archive became too abundant, too much information for the archival order to handle. The archive itself was too spectral, and according to Derrida it always is: "the structure of the archive is *spectral*. It is spectral *a priori*: neither present nor absent 'in the flesh,' neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met, no more than those of Hamlet's father, thanks to the possibility of a visor" (1995: 54).

Abu Ahmed was dead, he was laid in earth, he would no longer reappear and thus no longer be able to lead to that other and more important ghost, bin Laden. All of a

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9 The notion of the archive has been the object of much discussion in recent years. Andreas Huyssen questions memory and the archive in relation "to the ever increasing pace of change, as a site of temporal and spatial preservation" (2000: 35). Arjun Appadurai presents the archive as "the product of the anticipation of collective memory. Thus the archive is itself an aspiration rather than a recollection" (2003, 16). Wolfgang Ernst opposes the archive to the internet and cultural knowledge: "The nature of the Internet thus radically differs from the nature of the archive. Exactly as long as its records cannot be accessed by the general public for the use of cultural knowledge, a memory agency can be called archive" (2010: 64). In the present context, however, we focus on the Derridean notion of the archive as spectral formation, as the persistent haunting of the traces of the past: "the structure of the archive is spectral. It is spectral *a priori*" (Derrida, 1995: 54).

10 In his speech on September 20, 2001, President Bush stressed the responsibility to remember: "Even grief recedes with time and grace. But our resolve must not pass. Each of us will remember what happened that day, and to whom it happened. We'll remember the moment the news came – where we were and what we were doing. Some will remember an image of a fire, or a story of rescue. Some will carry memories of a face and a voice gone forever" (2001).

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sudden, he reappears out of the archive. The spectrality of the archive reinstalls his spectral body. And this spectral body brings with it the promise of finding the real body to be killed. The archive is always a matter of promise: "[The question of the archive] is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what this will have meant, we will only know in the times to come" (Derrida, 1995: 27).

And promise is crucial. The agents all remember the hunt for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. They were all engaged in the hunt for ghosts that were never found, ghosts that they themselves created by distorting the archive, by consciously and willingly betraying its content.[11] And they are terribly afraid that the hunt for bin Laden will turn out to be exactly such a construed endeavour.

A game of ghostly mirrors

Just as torture involved the meeting of antagonist ghosts, most clearly in the case of Daniel and Ammar, tradecraft is essentially about keeping your own spectrality and exorcising that of the enemy, leaving his body to kill.

Daniel warns Maya of going back to Pakistan: "Everybody knows you there now". She has been given a body, and soon after assassins await her in front of her house. They shoot at the car but her remaining armour, bulletproof glass, saves her and she manages to get back to safety behind the walls surrounding her abode. She is now "on a list", her body is vulnerable, and therefore she has no choice but to go back to Washington.

This tradecraft of exorcising and keeping spectrality turns out to be the end of both Abu Ahmed and bin Laden. According to the movie, they were simply conspicuously good at it; they were too spectral. The archived Abu Ahmed leads to the identification of the mother, and thus enables tracking the pay phones from where Abu Ahmed calls her, and finally tracking him when he starts using a cell phone.

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[11] Cf. Colin Powell on his speech to gather difternational support for the invasion of Iraq at the United Nations Security Council on February 5, 2003: "My infamous speech at the U.N. in 2003 about Iraqi WMD programs was not based on facts (...) the evidence was deeply flawed" (2012: 116–117).

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This, again, is a game of catching the ghost. Thorough surveillance tracks his white car to a house whose inhabitants' behavioural patterns as revealed by satellite images seem to carry the mark of spectral tradecraft. The agents sit around a table measuring out their beliefs in the actual body of the ghost: 50%, 60%, 80%. Even Daniel, the scholar and exorcist suggests a low 60% chance. Only Maya believes with 100% certainty that bin Laden is there.

If we have so far cast Daniel in the role of Horatio, the scholar who speaks to ghosts and charges them to speak, Maya takes the role of Hamlet. She is the one who was born to set time right. She was recruited for the CIA out of high school; she has done nothing else for the CIA than work on bin Laden. This is her task, this is her inheritance.

For her, bin Laden's eventual capture and death is as inevitable as death was to Hamlet: "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come" (5.2.215-18). Since she is absolutely convinced, 100% sure, that she has located and identified the body of bin Laden, she measures out the time between that identification and the fall of the ghost, the time it takes before the incursion to kill is approved. Just as there is much mirth in Hamlet's dealings with his vengeance, so too there is much sport in Maya's persistence when confronted with bureaucracy. Apart from the comical aspect of her presenting herself as "the motherfucker that found" bin Laden, there is a running gag of Maya writing the number of days gone by since the identification.

Atonement

When finally the mission is a go, they fly out in modified stealth Blackhawks. These helicopters get their own special introduction by the general in charge of their development: "I actually tried to kill this program a couple of times. (...) You'll notice these panels (...) The rotors have been muffled with decibel killers – it's slower than a Blackhawk and lacks the offence. But it can hide". Even the helicopters in this movie are ghosts clad in armour. Not unlike the violence of torture camouflaged as the technical execution of rational necessity, these helicopters constitute the technical camouflage of lethal violence.

This helicopter presentation initiates the last section of the movie, the incursion to kill bin Laden. It also presents a slight shift in narrative pace. A shift that was announced with the percentages of faith in bin Laden's presence and Maya's counting of the days.

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After the torturous attempts at making the detained body speak, followed by the tradecraft involved in finding the absent body of the culprit, this is where *Zero Dark Thirty* moves into its third ghostly mode: that of killing the body, finally exorcising the father of all ghosts, "the Big Man".

Until this point, the movie has been a rough summation of events. It has itself been a paradoxical fictional incorporation of first-hand accounts of "actual events". The movie narrates the ten-year story of the search in almost precisely two hours. The incursion, on the other hand, is practically shown in real time.[12] In this section, the narrative seems to desire the same fullness of body that the agents want from the ghost.

The stealth of the helicopters is ostensibly demonstrated both visually and audibly: the black silhouettes against the night, and the carefully designed sound of "decibel killer"-covered rotors. The movie seems to convey both aesthetic pride and pleasure in its depiction of the helicopters' camouflage.

It shows in minute detail the crashing of one helicopter, the landing of the other, the deployment of the team in smaller groups and the placing of a sniper on a rooftop. Where the first search part of the movie presented a strict selection of events, the incursion seems to want all of it. The sniper has absolutely no role in the plot. He does nothing. And yet we distinctly see him climbing to the rooftop and getting in position, and we see him climbing down again when it is time to go. One remembers Aristotle's requirements regarding the narrative whole and the unity of the plot: "(…) the component events should be so structured that if any is displaced or removed, the sense of the whole is disturbed and dislocated (…)".[13] The abundant detail *is* a necessary part of narrative strategy, however: it is a celebration of the overwhelming force of the incursion.

We follow the different soldiers moving through the house, shooting or neutralising every single one of the inhabitants. Whenever one of the ghostly figures tries to hide, the soldiers whisper: "Khalid…", "Osama…". The technique works, the ghost responds by cautiously stepping forth. The conjuring of the ghost allows its exorcism. This underlines the previously mentioned proposition of the movie that, essentially, the ghost *wants* to be exorcised. In *Zero Dark Thirty* the ghost wants to

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[12] The incursion takes about 30 minutes in the movie, which is how long it was planned to take. "The raid was not supposed to last more than 30 minutes. The forces finished in 38 minutes (…)" (Allen, 2011).
[13] (Aristotle, 1995: 59).

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be named, it wants a body. Even the father of all ghosts finally assumes his identity: Osama bin Laden steps forth when conjured and is shot to death.

We never see him. We just see his iconic beard. The only image we actually see of the exorcised body is presented on the small LCD screen of a soldier's digital camera. The ocular prosthetics of the incursion delivers a final twist in the visor effect. The American soldiers all wear helmets with actual visors. Not only do the visors cover their faces, allowing the soldiers to see without being seen, but the visor also allows the soldiers to see in a special way. They all have four lenses mounted. It is unclear what each particular lens does, except that they allow the soldiers to see in the dark. Interestingly, such night vision is achieved by technologically enhancing the spectral range and the intensity range of the human eyesight. This visor effect is not only seeing without being seen, it is seeing ghosts that hide outside of human visibility.

The soldiers are armoured ghosts with a visor that allows them to see and in *Zero Dark Thirty*, when you see this visor, not only is there no eye contact, there is only death. The multiple eyes of the visor enable an enhanced visor effect, a Medusa effect, where looking into its eyes means instant death.[14] The Medusa effect is a modified visor effect: you see the visor, you die. In Derrida, the visor effect is the origin of law.[15] In *Zero Dark Thirty,* the Medusa effect is the look that kills – it is the look, the enhanced prosthetic gaze, that lets the body and the spectre coincide. It is a technological scholar, an apparatus of identity and thus of death.

The archival promise

Bin Laden is put in a body bag and brought to the helicopter. A certain amount of tension is created not by the transport of the body – it is by now but a body, it has played its part – but by the transport of the "treasure" of information: file cabinets and computers. This treasure promises the fullness of the archive, it promises to exorcise the spectrality of the archive behind which Abu Ahmed had hidden for so long. But again time, the fabric of crisis, prevents full presence. The archive is too rich to be brought home before the Pakistan forces arrive.

Back at base, Osama is dumped on a table, while the entire hubbub is centred around the information. It has to be classified; it has to be labelled. "Collect all media! CDs, DVDs?" The archive has to be fed, it was the cause of this late capture of

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[14] The term Medusa effect as used here is very loosely inspired by the term "Medusa-Effekt" as described by Werckmeister (2005). Further explorations along these lines would be interesting but surpass the scope of the present article.

[15] "To feel ourselves seen by a look which it will always be impossible to cross, that is the visor effect on the basis of which we inherit from the law" (Derrida, 2006: 7).

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bin Laden in the first place. Such "human error" should never occur again. By killing bin Laden redemption is had, the engagement with the fullness of the archive hopes to assure prevention.

Coda

Maya, our vengeful Hamlet, does not care about the information, however. She opens the bag, and again we do not see the body, only a bit of the iconic beard. She nods slowly. The officer on the phone dryly communicates the authenticity of the body: "Sir, the agency expert gave visual confirmation. Yes, sir, the girl. A hundred per cent". The girl was right in her 100% estimation. It is he. She closes the bag on bin Laden. Closure.

Zero Dark Thirty ends in a small coda. The main character enters a military transport aircraft and the pilot asks: "Are you Maya?". The time of spectrality is no longer. Instead of the "motherfucker" who found bin Laden, she is just Maya. The pilot continues: "Where do you want to go?". She sits down and starts to cry. The movie ends.

The movie begins with a trauma, a national crisis; in the end there is closure. The bag is literally closed on bin Laden, it is he, his body is found and it is dead. Maya does not cry in sorrow, nor in happiness, but in loss of the object of her desire. All she was and all she did was hunt the ghost. Now she has no object and she has no purpose. "Where do you want to go?" There is nowhere to go.

Closing the bag on bin Laden

This analysis has tried to demonstrate the narrative logic of *Zero Dark Thirty* as that of a death in search of another death: trauma, treatment, atonement; crisis, coercion, closure. Desperate voices cry for help and then fall silent, reduced to ghostly reverberations. These cries proclaim the worst moment of crisis in US history. President Obama recognised as much in his announcement of the death of bin Laden:

> It was nearly 10 years ago that a bright September day was darkened by the worst attack on the American people in our history. The images of 9/11 are seared into our national memory. (...) And yet we know that the worst images are those that were unseen to the world. The empty seat at the dinner table. Children who were forced to grow up without their mother or their father. Parents who would never know the feeling

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of their child's embrace. Nearly 3,000 citizens taken from us, leaving a gaping hole in our hearts. (2011)

A gaping hole to be filled, the all too present and all too visible absence, a time and a place out of joint to be set right, a crisis to be handled. As we saw in *Hamlet*, the ghostly enjoinment calls for revenge and stirs fears for the nations' future, the double temporal logic of redemption and prevention at play in *Zero Dark Thirty*. This logic operates in the torturing attempts to make the spectral detainees speak with impossible fullness as well as in the tradecraft efforts to locate the ghost and thereby give it a body to be killed.

Within the narrative logic of *Zero Dark Thirty,* the death of bin Laden – the confirmation of his identity, the coincidence of his body and his name as enclosed in a body bag – presents redemption. In the words of President Obama: "Justice has been done".

Maya, our Hamlet, breaks down in tears at the loss of her goal. She had purged her mind of all other pursuits and now has nothing left.[16] But prevention is still not assured. As stated by President Obama: "There's no doubt that al Qaeda will continue to pursue attacks against us. We must – and we will – remain vigilant at home and abroad" (2011). *Zero Dark Thirty* acknowledges this in the final fixation on the archive. Bin Laden is in the bag, now it is all about the fullness of the archive, exorcising the spectrality of the archive to fulfil the archival promise of a "future simple, as what will be, as predictable progress" (Chun, 2008: 154).[17]

As has been mentioned, in *Hamlet* revenge was had but the nation was lost. Fortinbras, the conquering prince of Norway, arrives just as vengeance is consummated and all parties lie dead. Only Horatio, the scholar and failed interlocutor of ghosts, is left to tell the tale. *Zero Dark Thirty,* like Horatio, has accepted the charge of telling the story: the bloody and unnatural deaths of 9/11, the accidental judgments, casual slaughters and deaths of the search (*Hamlet*, 5.2.384-91). But Horatio tells of how these deaths in the end fall "on th'inventors' heads" thus bringing the nation to a state of complete defencelessness that allows Fortinbras to just walk in and take over without a single skirmish. In *Zero Dark Thirty,* however, the nation triumphs in its revenge, the nation redeems the traumatic crisis. And it

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[16] Cf. Hamlet on the responsibility of remembrance and vengeance as sole occupiers of his mind: "thy commandment all alone shall live Within the book and volume of my brain" (1.5.102-3).
[17] Chun talks about memory and storage in new media but her analysis of the desired "always-thereness" of new media also applies for archival desire.

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does so in an emphatic way where the narrative style goes from the spectral summation of events to the almost real time fullness of the act of vengeance. The movie celebrates national triumph in its depiction of stealthy helicopters, ocular prostheses, and military precision.

This celebration of vengeful triumph should lead us to question the notion of justice. *Zero Dark Thirty* clearly agrees with President Obama: "Justice has been done". Closure is clear in the closing of the bag and Maya's lack of destination. But is this really justice? "And what if disadjustment were on the contrary the condition of justice?" (Derrida, 2006: 22). What if closure is the exact opposite of justice?[18] "To be 'out of joint,' whether it be present Being or present time, can do harm and do evil. It is no doubt the very possibility of evil. But without the opening of this possibility, there remains, perhaps, beyond good and evil, only the necessity of the worst" (Derrida, 2006: 34). And "can one not yearn for a justice that one day (…) would finally be removed from the fatality of vengeance?" (Derrida, 2006: 25).

This questioning of the final exorcism and closure of *Zero Dark Thirty* is not to present the Derridean notion of justice as the ultimate litmus test which the movie's narrative logic fails. It is simply to point out a problem in the double temporality of that narrative logic. For if justice is in the closure, in redemption, then what of prevention? How full an archive before its spectrality is sufficiently exorcised? How many bodies are yet to be exorcised before no ghost can ever walk again and how can the archive prevent any future haunting of bin Laden? How can Horatio make the ghost promise that no harm will become the nation?

What if our contemporary Horatio were not the exorcist but a new scholar – not the one charging the ghost to speak, but one capable of "thinking the possibility of the specter, the specter as possibility" (Derrida, 2006: 13)? What if Horatio, and Hamlet with him, saw that spectrality is not the game of ghosts – the game of making the ghostly body speak without spectrality and giving the ghost a body to be killed, a game of life and death – but in fact the substance of being itself? What if the disadjustment of crisis were not the deployment of any means to the double end of redemption and prevention? Then crisis, even at its most horrible, would carry with it the possibility of a future instead of the eternal exorcising search for the redeeming closure of the past and the prevention of what is yet to come.

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[18] For a further development of the Derridean notion of justice in relation to violence, power, force, and law, cf. his *Force of Law*, where he also describes justice as having no closure: "Justice remains, is yet, to come, à-venir, it has an, it is à-venir, the very dimension of events irreducibly to come" (1990: 969).

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