Understanding Violence Through Film

Nicholas A. Painter

Everywhere we look today, there are violent films ready for public consumption. Superheroes punching people through walls, menacing slashers hacking through people with chainsaws, and time-traveling robots hell bent on destroying the human race are just a few examples. The 2000s and 2010s were rife with blockbuster depictions of the United States military thwarting terrorist threats, saving would-be victims, and even repelling a space invasion or two in films like *Battle Los Angeles* and Michael Bay's *Transformers.* These violent affairs certainly have spectacle going for them, with huge explosions and protracted gun battles taking the center stage. By examining director Clint Eastwood's film, *American Sniper*, which is a product of its time, it becomes clear that films allow viewers to explore violence and the effects of violence in a way that poses no risk to themselves. To demonstrate this, a closer examination of the film's scenes, contextualized by psychology and anthropology, is necessary.

American Sniper is a semi-biographical film depicting the life and military career of Navy SEAL sniper Chris Kyle. The film spans from Kyle's childhood, where he is instilled with the values of protecting his loved ones and never quitting. As he grows up and chases rodeo belt buckles, Kyle becomes spurred to enlist in the U.S. Navy after the bombing of the U.S. Embassies in Tanzania and Kenya. He goes to a recruiting station, where he tells the recruiter, "I'm not most men, sir. I don't quit" (Eastwood 00:10:15). He graduates from the rigorous Navy Basic Underwater Demolition School and earns his way to Sniper School, where he learns his trade. During this time, he meets his future wife, Taya, who will serve as an anchor and symbol for his life stateside while he is deployed. Overseas, Kyle finds himself providing cover fire for Marines as they clear city blocks, among other missions. It is at this time that he finds himself at odds with the mysterious Mufasa, an enemy sniper who acts as a foil for Kyle throughout the film. Mufasa is depicted as being the killer of Ryan Job, the first SEAL killed in Iraq, and several other service members throughout the film. On a rotation home, Kyle has issues processing the things he encountered overseas, such as losing friends and seeing an enemy fighter known as "The Butcher" take a power drill to a child's leg.

On his final tour to Iraq, Kyle manages to kill Mufasa with a long-range shot that compromises his team's position. This results in a desperate gunfight as the team holds out for their extraction. Kyle barely escapes, only doing so after ditching his rifle to catch up to a moving armored personnel carrier. Back stateside, Kyle realizes the toll that the war has taken on him and

volunteers at the local VA hospital to help veterans recover from their experiences in war. It is because of this that Kyle is murdered by a fellow veteran, whom he was trying to help. The film closes out with real-life footage from Chris Kyle's funeral procession and accompanying police escort.

Understanding *American Sniper* is not necessarily a hard thing to do. The film itself is relatively straightforward with its messaging. However, this makes it a good vessel for understanding why these sorts of stories are so appealing and even important for viewers. Understanding tales of warfare and great warriors is an age-old endeavor for humanity. On the urge to understand warfare, psychologist Sigmund Freud said, "War strips off the later deposits of civilization and allows the primitive man in us to reappear. It forces us again to be heroes who cannot believe in their own death, it stamps all strangers as enemies whose death we ought to cause or wish; it counsels us to rise above the death of those whom we love"(28). For the American people, who had been at war for thirteen years at the time of *American Sniper*'s release, war was an omnipresent part of life. Freud puts forth that living in such a time, faced day to day with the knowledge that your nation is at war, and being forced to accept the mortality of yourself and those you love, makes us much like our ancient ancestors, who lived in a state of perpetual survival without the comforts of civilization (Freud 29). In essence, Freud asserts that being subjected to such difficulties causes members of a society to feel as though their lives have been lost while they are still alive and are forced to accept their inevitable death. This "loss of life" makes us seek out some figure in fiction who can die for us or kill other people for us. Experiencing this figure's story allows us to experience "death" with no risk for ourselves because our minds have identified with the figure whom we outlive (Freud 19). This means that in viewing *American Sniper,* we not only experience war and its costs but also a death of sorts. By virtue of having followed along from the very beginning to the final hour, we understand what the costs of violence are and what is lost in death. We get to "die" in a safe and controlled way, relieving the fear of death, if only temporarily.

The depictions of violence in *American Sniper* are used to reinforce the effects of violence. A deeper analysis of key scenes depicting violence allows for better contextualization of violence's role in this story. The first of these scenes, referred to as the Drill Scene (00:45:00), takes place during a meeting with a Sheikh, a local elder, who is offering information on a person of interest for the SEALs. Kyle ends up pinned by gunfire on a rooftop and forced to listen while the Sheikh's son is murdered with a power drill by The Butcher. This scene, coupled with another scene depicting a meat locker full of dismembered human remains during a raid on an enemy building, lends credence to Schmid's assertion in *Natural Born Celebrities*

concerning the role of terrorists in media post 9/11. Schmid states, "Despite the long-standing iconic status of the serial killer in American culture before 9/11, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks it seemed reasonable to suppose that the serial killer would be quickly replaced by the terrorist as the personification of criminal evil" (246). This is not the case, however, as Schmid states, "[T]he two categories overlapped" (246). The terrorist was instead presented as a serial killer, serving as a means of familiarizing the American people with the danger of the terror threat while keeping fear at manageable levels (Schmid 246). The terrorists in *American Sniper* are indeed equated to serial killers through their actions, relishing in the gruesome acts that they carry out. Contrasted with Kyle's reaction to his first kill overseas, the differences between what the film considers "good" and "bad" violence are rather striking. Kyle is forced to kill a child preparing to suicide bomb a column of American Marines. After the child is killed, his mother takes the grenade, and Kyle is forced to kill her as well before she can make it to the Marines moving down the street. Kyle is visibly shaken by killing a child and a woman. He remains silent until the Marine with him tries to celebrate Kyle's first kill, bumping him on the shoulder, to which Kyle responds, "Get the fuck off me" (Eastwood 00:28:10). Here, the film clearly tells viewers that killing is a miserable business. This example is especially interesting because of how it contrasts with the later Drill Scene. Kyle hates the fact that he had to kill that child as a last resort; he sees his targets as human. Meanwhile, The Butcher relies on violence toward children to influence the behaviors of those around him. Kyle kills the child quickly, while The Butcher prolongs the suffering of his victim. The Butcher sees his killing as a means of leverage and influence and his victims as instruments to be exploited for the power they can give him over others, dehumanizing them. Such dehumanization has been linked to self-feeding cycles of inter-group violence, as depicted in *American Sniper* (Bruneua 14).

When Kyle returns home, he is evidently struggling to cope with the things that he has seen overseas. It is through these struggles that the film explores the effects of violence. One effect of violence that is explored by *American Sniper* is fear. Anthropologist Diane King discussed fear due to violence based on her time spent with Iraqi Kurds from 1995 to 2003. The Kurds were survivors of attempted genocide by the regime of Saddam Hussein, and King details how fear permeated their daily lives in the so-called "Republic of Fear," facilitating an all-encompassing concern for the safety of oneself and those they love. In one instance of such fear, King details fearing for her life as her bus is stopped near an Iraqi military checkpoint; she states, "It seemed possible that I was living some of my last moments and, judging from the commentary of the other passengers, they thought so as well" (King 52). King's anthropological examination of protracted fear's effect on society is

reflected in Kyle's individual experience in the film. This deep, prolonged fear takes its toll on Kyle. At one point, Kyle refuses to leave his rifle to the point of urinating where he lies so that he will not miss a shot that might save a life (Eastwood 00:33:00). Kyle's own brother, Jeff, demonstrates acute fear of his situation, appearing miserable and stating "fuck this place" at a chance meeting on an airfield in Iraq (Eastwood 00:57:00). Fear is only one of the costs of violence. Another, more direct cost, is the death of Kyle's loved ones. Throughout the film, many service members die, but none impact Kyle so much as the death of Navy SEALs Marc Lee and Ryan Job. Kyle is, understandably, deeply affected by both events. Kyle wants to make the enemy pay for what was done to his brothers-in-arms (Eastwood 01:31:00). This desire for revenge, yet again, speaks to the dehumanizing of whole groups that occurs as a result of warfare (Bruneau and Kteily 15). His desire to return to battle and avenge his fallen teammates takes a toll on his relationship with his wife, Taya, further shedding light on the cost of war. "I'm here, your family is here!" she pleads. "Let someone else go!" to which Kyle responds, "I couldn't live with myself" (Eastwood 01:30:00). This speaks to the savior complex (itself rooted in fear for those who do not deserve to die) that Kyle cultivates from childhood. When Kyle finally does return home, he struggles to return to everyday life. After nearly attacking the family dog for making his son scream during horseplay, Kyle seeks help from the local Veterans Administration. Here, he says he is "haunted by the guys he could not save" (Eastwood 01:57:00). Kyle begins speaking to disabled veterans who are missing limbs and struggling with life. Perhaps no other line in the film demonstrates the toll that going to war has taken on Kyle so clearly as his response to one of the veterans calling him "The Legend." Kyle simply states, "That's a title you don't want. Trust me" (Eastwood 01:59:30).

It is possible that deeper analysis of visual techniques depicting violence and comparison of the movie to the novel could yield a more thorough understanding of the events depicted within the story, and the effects of violence depicted therein. However, that is beyond the scope of this paper. *American Sniper* is just one example of the exploration of violence that popular media facilitates. This single film explores complex topics such as the types of violence that can occur in war and the different effects of that violence, including fear for the safety of those we love, regret about those who could not be saved, and death itself. Even with the limited content of a two-hour-long film, *American Sniper* manages to demonstrate how exploring violence can help viewers understand its nature by showing the costs associated with violence, whether that is the cost extracted from society at large or the burdens placed on the individual psyche of those asked to perpetrate it on our behalf.

Works Cited

Bruneau, Emile, and Kteily Nour. "The Enemy as Animal: Symmetric Dehumanization during Asymmetric Warfare." *PLOS One*, vol. 12, no. 7, 26 Jul. 2017, e0181422. *Academic Search Complete*, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0181422.

Eastwood, Clint, director. *American Sniper*. Warner Brothers, 2013. *Amazon Prime Video*, https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B00RFHV99W/ref=atv_hm_mys_c_uJQOV1_ 2_1. Accessed 5 Oct. 2025.

King, Diane E. "Fieldwork and Fear in Iraqi Kurdistan." *Violence: Ethnographic Encounters*, Berg Publishers, 2009, pp. 51-68. *eBook Academic Collection*, https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=a35f31f2-2e77-3fd1-af34-0322c7e43901. Accessed 5 Oct. 2025.

Freud, Sigmund. "Our Attitudes Towards Death." *Reflections on War and Death*, Translated by A. A. Brill, Duke Classics, 12 Feb. 2014, pp. 20-29. *Park University's Library Catalog*, https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=11226e88-1374-3263-8bf9-5d8b730d64d7. Accessed 5 Oct. 2025.

Schmid, David. "Serial Killing in America after 9/11." *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture*, University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 244-257. *eBook Academic Collection*, https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=b62fdf0f-9d3b-30cd-b3fd-c152269b53 f4. Accessed 5 Oct. 2025.