

“My father died for a good cause down there...”

Popular culture discourse on German responsibility to protect Afghanistan

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In 2001, Afghanistan became a threat to Germany. This perception, this act of ‘writing security’ shows in a strong Bundeswehr involvement in the ISAF and OEF missions. This involvement is special, given the non-interventionist history and identity of the Federal Republic. Today, this identity conflict is reflected in a fierce and multi-faceted discourse on the German mission in Afghanistan. This paper looks into representations of Germany’s involvement in Afghanistan in recent German TV films. Taking up the war as a contested discursive site, these films reflect on and establish the ritual entanglement of peace at home and war abroad. On this fictional micro-level, German soldiers have to come to terms with both their actions and experiences. This struggle portrays the soldier as ‘perpetrator and victim in one’ (ZEHFUSS 2004) and is represented metaphorically as a conflict of generations: The young accept their responsibility to go to war in order to bring stability, fight terrorism and ‘save brown women from brown men’ (SPIVAK 1988). We argue that these popular culture texts are framed by Orientalist discourses which provide seemingly clear-cut distinctions between self and other. By drawing on such stereotypes, the German military deployment can be represented as a ‘just’ war, an act of responsibility. This is of crucial political importance: as Orientalist discourses grant the use of military violence political legitimacy, Germany can reconcile itself with its past and with the current war.

*“Germany is defended in the Hindu Kush.”
(Defence Minister Peter Struck, 2002)*

Introduction

The Federal Republic of Germany is involved in many military operations around the world. Protecting sea trade from Somali pirates, policing cities in Kosovo, and reconstructing Afghan provinces – these are all tasks that have come to be associated with the German *Bundeswehr*. Ever since reunification, such international missions have increased both in number and scope. The current mission in Afghanistan constitutes the largest of these engagements, on both counts: As of January 2010, about 4.200 soldiers are deployed there (BUNDESMINISTERIUM DER VERTEIDIGUNG 2010), performing a number of tasks ranging from bridge construction to Special Forces operations within Operation Enduring Freedom.

For some countries, this overview might seem like a routine list of standard military tasks. For Germany, however, these so-called *Auslandseinsätze* (out-of-area missions) mark a highly contested policy field. The proverbial German *sonderweg* is meaningful not only in relation to allied countries and troops but also for German political discourse. For this discourse has for decades

been dominated by a very specific self-conception of Germany as a non-violent actor. As Maja Zehfuss recalls:

Until the early 1990s, the FRG's armed forces, the Bundeswehr, had not been deployed beyond the state's borders other than for disaster relief in relation to floods, droughts and earthquakes. The notion that they should be used outside the FRG for military functions overturned what had seemed self-evident to many: that Germany could never again use force except for strictly defensive purposes. Nevertheless, military involvement abroad increasingly came to be seen as not only possible but inevitable (ZEHFUSS 2002, 23).

This self-evidence to refrain from military aggression, of course, is rooted in Germany's extremely violent past in the Third Reich. The antidote to this role has been to adopt an identity of strict non-aggression – a concept of self thus built on moral premises such as 'German soldiers should never invade foreign countries again'. When the *Bundeswehr* was established in 1955, it was assigned a strictly defensive role, as prescribed in the German constitution (see also GEIS 2005 and HACKE 2003).

This role, this identity of Germany as an actor who uses force for defensive purposes only, started to change from 1990 onwards. This change entailed both growing expectations and demands from others as well as shifts in the role Germany saw for itself.¹ When Germany took part in the Kosovo war in 1999, thereby attacking another country, hegemonic discourse had shifted towards representing this decision as moral obligation, a 'responsibility to protect' (SCHWAB-TRAPP 2000). Moral reasoning was now not preventing but rather prescribing the use of force. Nevertheless, decisions about out-of-area missions remain a fiercely debated issue in German politics, which can be interpreted as an expression of the inherent tensions of German identity as international actor (ZEHFUSS 2002, 2007).

By invoking the concept of identity we do not assume some 'essentially German' identity which could be somehow defined by a mix of pacifism, a certain interpretation of history or a particular conception of the nation. As Germany's identity is not fixed, it needs to be shaped along the supposed identity of an imagined other. This strategy of 'othering' can be considered as a self-assuring identity practice (see esp. SPIVAK 1985). In this case, othering is framed especially by an Orientalist sub-text. Following Edward Said (SAID 1978/1995), we read Orientalism as a set of practices which bring about a hierarchical representation of self and other. In his seminal study, Said detects the way in which the Oriental is represented in Western political, academic and literary accounts as traditional, wild, emotional, feminine and ungrateful. As a result of a century old history of domination and desire towards the Orient, the Oriental is frequently spoken for by Western powers. In Marx' words, the Orientals are imagined as unable to represent themselves; they must be represented by the West.

The practice of Orientalism does not only entail to speak of and for the idealised other. To speak about the other is also to speak about the own identity. By categorising the Orient as its other, the West represents itself as modern, civilised, rational, male and benevolent. Such a dichotomous categorization implicitly valorises self over other. Representation of the Orient as counterpart of the West entails that the West is constituted as agent in the first place.

Yet, endeavours to construct social identities are always contested. The larger discursive struggles that revolve around the question of what it means to be a German state after World War II are mirrored in German political discourse on *Bundeswehr* missions in Afghanistan. From the start, the deployment of troops to Afghanistan has been labelled a 'stabilising mission'. Government

¹ This shift is well documented and deconstructed in ZEHFUSS 2002.

members and representatives struggle to avoid the term 'war' for what is going on in Afghanistan. The most recent label in this name game is "non-intentional armed conflict" (defence minister zu Guttenberg, MEINHOF 2010). And the initial reasoning of former defence minister Peter Struck that "Germany is defended in the Hindu Kush" has coined the debates in a very special way.²

Debates within the political arena, however, are by no means the only site where this struggle is taking place. The institutional political debates are situated in a larger discourse where the formation of meaning is shaped by different discursive practices. This meaning is constructed by various utterances from different sites, all of which do not only contribute to the discourse but are also shaped by it. Power is exercised in these discourses if a certain framing of different events comes to be considered as hegemonic. Starting from the premise that "reality cannot be known other than through our representations" (ZEHFUSS 2002, 36), we consider popular culture as a "site of cultural practice which provides a framework for storytelling itself" (WEBER 2007, 183). Therefore, our research interest is in mass media/popular culture, which is slowly taking up the issue of German military involvement in Afghanistan. In analysing popular media, e.g. non-specialist texts, we look into the way political issues are represented outside the political field. We pursue our argument in four steps: The following section focuses on methodological aspects of treating film as text and introduces the empirical material. We will then zoom into the micro-level of the soldier as an allegory for Germany, highlighting the family relations and the importance of remembering as two crucial aspects of our analysis. Finally, we summarise and conclude our argument and explore possible avenues for further research.

Methodological approach

How can popular culture artefacts inform our understanding of international politics? In critical approaches to international relations, we find a growing body of literature stressing the relevance of how world politics is represented in popular culture (see WELDES 1999, 2001, 2003a; WEBER 1999, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2007; NEXON/NEUMANN 2006; or BEHNKE 2006). Inspired by this work, we treat films as texts open for critical reading which should produce or uncover a signifying structure (DERRIDA 1997). Neumann and Nexon (2006, especially pp. 6-20), for example, distinguish four approaches in which popular culture can be seen respectively as a cause or consequence of world politics (1), as mirroring themes or processes in world politics or IR theory (2), as evidence for norms, beliefs or identities (3), or as interacting with other representations in the political domain (4). Siding with the latter approach, we focus explicitly on the naturalising effects of popular culture (NEUMANN/NEXON 2006, 17). When taking popular culture as constitutive for a particular understanding of international politics, it is crucial to analyse how it works in constituting and naturalising particular norms, values, identities and ideas (NEUMANN/NEXON 2006, 15). It is in this last way that we are reading films in this paper.

Attempts at naturalising a particular understanding always go at the expense of other understandings. To bring about a particular understanding in a cultural site, discursive hegemony needs to be established by way of different strategies, e.g. deferral or displacement. According to Cynthia Weber (WEBER 2007, 184), deferral means that the knowledge about a particular

² There is some confusion regarding the source of this key statement. Minister Struck first made it at a press conference on December 5, 2002, departing from the pre-written official government statement. The argument has since been used in many army and government statements (e.g. STRUCK 2004, see also SCHWARTZ 2005, 252-264 for a critical assessment of German foreign policy after 1998).

political point of view is “delayed so much that we never receive it.” Displacement means that the knowledge “[...] is placed beyond the bounds of our consideration.” Both Jutta Weldes and Cynthia Weber approach these discursive struggles by analysing the working of ideologies in films.

Weldes starts her pioneering work on the intersection of science-fiction and world politics (WELDES 1999, 2003b) from the assumption that the significance of culture as an object of IR analysis should not be restrained to elite or interstate settings only. In effect, “popular, or more accurately, mass culture also contributes to the reproduction, and hence the popularization, of official foreign policy discourse and thus to state action” (WELDES 1999, 117-118). Taking up a discourse-oriented concept of culture, her work focuses on popular culture as a “field on which battles over meaning are fought” (WELDES 1999, 118). Her analysis of the working of ideologies in *Star Trek* shows how this feature made US foreign policy commonsensical. While Weldes stresses the mutual constitution of popular culture and foreign policy practices, the exact working of popular culture remains somewhat ambiguous. As a result, Weldes concludes that “*Star Trek*, as an artefact of American popular culture, parallels and reproduces elements of the common sense of US foreign policy discourse” (WELDES 1999, 133). The production of common sense by popular culture representations of world politics seems to be the most important mechanism in Weldes’ interpretative analysis of *Star Trek*. Popular culture and diplomatic representations of world politics should therefore not be taken as distinct from one another. Weldes suggests that in popular culture – and in particular in science-fiction – the same stories seem to be staged like in world politics (WELDES 2003a).

In her book on using films for teaching Critical International Relations, Weber (WEBER 2007) states that in both Hollywood films and IR theories the same myths, defined as unconscious ideologies, work to naturalise specific beliefs and assumptions about international politics. The important point here is that popular culture is not politically innocent but works to build a common sense about world politics. Just like Weldes, Weber argues that the dividing line between the imaginative of popular culture and material realities of world politics is frequently far from clear. Both Weber and Weldes’ work shows that the popular culture/world politics intertext shares many metaphors and similar narratives; this points to a common imaginative framework of both popular culture and political discourse, a joint moral grammar (WEBER 2006).

This moral grammar enables actors to produce discursive intelligibility and possibly consensus about political practices in world politics by providing plausible and recognisable discursive frames. These frames build on shared social fantasies and desires that can support social structures, but can also work to subvert existing hierarchies, e.g. by ridiculing or criticising power relations or pointing to alternative, possibly utopian visions of politics (WELDES 2003a). As scholars like Glynos and Howarth (GLYNOS/HOWARTH 2007) point out, the most important function of fantasies and desire is to fill the void of identity with objects which are suitable for identification. And this is exactly what popular culture does. Films literally re-present the world – they make it newly present – in the form of dramatised imaginations. By telling particular stories about the world, popular culture provides the framework for imagining it (WEBER 2006).

Having identified the ideology, myth or enacted fantasy of a film, most authors then attempt to link them back to the more formal political discourse. For example, Cynthia Weber (WEBER 2006) interprets the role of films as providing a meta-narrative for experiencing extraordinary world political events like September 11. But what is more, these films also form a moral grammar which couches the attacks and US reactions in a very specific historical context, e.g. the Japanese

attack on Pearl Harbor in the Second World War. Weber (WEBER 2006) proposes here to focus on the family relations of the film's characters to understand the moral grammar of popular culture representations. Read together, these representations of US history provide a nearly mythical reservoir of subjectivities and models of morality.

Following Weber (WEBER 2006), we paid particular attention to family relations as a discursive site where contests over meaning were staged.³ In our reading of German popular culture discourse, we approached the material in several steps by repeated viewings of all films as a whole, taking notes and discussing our impressions. We thus identified several key scenes in each movie in which the main themes are treated, of which we then produced transcripts and translations from German to English. The opening scenes proved to be especially important. In a third step, we conducted a comparative analysis of the different narratives and strategies of representation in our films. We concentrated on dialogues between the characters; however, a broader focus on modes of visual representation could prove to be more fruitful.

Material

The texts chosen for this task are four recent TV films that constitute a novel genre in Germany, the veteran's movie, thus holding a position as both new and distinct in the field.⁴ All films were produced by the ARD, the major public broadcasting channel in Germany, and were first aired in 2008 and 2009 to a nation-wide audience of millions. The first film is called *Willkommen zuhause* (Welcome home), a stand-alone feature film. *Bundeswehr* soldier Ben Winter returns from his deployment in Kunduz. While he survived an assault on his vehicle, his friend Torben died. Winter cannot cope with his trauma, he feels guilty for Torben's death. His behaviour is ever more disturbing, alienating his pregnant girlfriend, friends, and his family. In the end, Ben goes into therapy to recover his memory and realises that he is not guilty for Torben's death. The second film, *Nacht vor Augen* (A Hero's Welcome), is an award-winning feature film about *Bundeswehr* soldier David Kleinschmidt who returns home from Afghanistan where he accidentally shot an Afghan boy while serving on a special operation. His encounter with danger and his own violence have left him traumatised. Unable to go back to his civil life with his girl-friend and family, David's behaviour becomes increasingly unsound until he finally receives psychiatric treatment. These two films in particular sparked a serious debate on traumatised soldiers in Germany. When *Willkommen zuhause* was first aired in German television, it was followed up by a TV debate on the issue. Both films received wide media coverage and sparked a debate about the psychic condition of returning soldiers from Afghanistan (BUß 2009, BARTELS 2009, RUZAS 2009, TENBERG 2009, SEITZ 2009, STRÖBELE 2008, HEINE 2009, GRAW 2009).

The third film *Bloch – Tod eines Freundes* (Death of a friend) is part of a series about psychologist Dr. Maximilian Bloch. In our episode, first aired in 2009, he faces two families that have to deal with the Afghanistan missions of the respective fathers. While Richard Seifert died on the mission, his best friend Frank Rode suffers from his traumatic experiences. Out of guilt, Rode harasses his

³ Two caveats are in order here: firstly, while we acknowledge the interesting work which is done in this field, we are not primarily concerned in this paper with the so-called 'aesthetic turn in IR' (BLEIKER 2001). Secondly, we do not focus explicitly on gender, even though this might be a promising avenue for further research: for example, none of the depictions breaks away from the proper gender dichotomy of fighting soldier abroad (male) vs. concerned partner/widow at home (female), cf. also footnote 7.

⁴ We are aware of the fact that there are films about the German veterans of the Second World War. However, these films rather deal with the problem of the German past and not with the Orientalist discourse that we are primarily interested in. Yet, a comparison between these films might be worth the effort.

friend's family by being overprotective, patrolling at their house at night. The adults' struggles are mirrored in the next generation as the children fight their own battles: Paul Seifert wants to join the army, while Tina Rode is a pacifist and activist. Bloch finally manages to psychoanalyse Rode, who discovers that his hesitation to shoot an Afghan child soldier ultimately caused his friend's death. The last film under discussion, *Klick gemacht* (It finally clicked), is a crime movie and part of a series called *Polizeiruf 110* (Emergency call 110). *Bundeswehr* lieutenant Darkow is abducted and forced to stand on a land mine until he confesses about his part in a bombing of a *Bundeswehr* trail with three casualties. Police inspector Papen and military police captain Steiger investigate the family and meet the survivors of the Kunduz assault. It turns out that the survivors and the father of a killed soldier jointly kidnapped Darkow to force the army to tell the true story behind the assault. In the end, it is revealed that Darkow wanted to deliver 'good news' to his superiors and took unnecessary risks. This true story is not made public, however, as military intelligence, embodied by Cpt. Steiger's father, is able to cover it up.⁵

As veteran movies go, the central theme of each film is the soldier returning home from the battlefield. That some of them were killed during the mission is but a slight variation of that theme in our context, because those killed determine the lives of their respective families just as much as those who returned. Every soldier is clearly marked by the mission, as we will elaborate in detail below.

Self and other

Representations of the German self are ubiquitous throughout the material, as every film is set in this context. In general, it is a very peculiar image of the country that is shown: With the exception of *Klick gemacht*, which is set in downtown Munich, the story unfolds in a rural, small-town setting, where the next forest is always close by and people stop for a chat at the local grocery store. The more urban sites shown are very neat and orderly suburbia, as in the case of *Tod eines Freundes* which makes extensive use of a slow, steady aerial shot of the characters' quarter. This impression is reinforced further through the nearly complete absence of migrants throughout the films.⁶

Representations of Afghanistan, on the other hand, are relatively sparse. Among our cases, *Tod eines Freundes* is a prime example of Orientalist othering. As the story of the film is set in Germany, not much of Afghanistan is actually shown. What is shown, however, through flashbacks of the veteran Rode, is mostly a *Bundeswehr* convoy driving down a dusty road. These sequences are spread throughout the film, and more and more details are being revealed as Rode thinks back to this experience. Technically, these sequences are all shown through some kind of filter, the edges and colours are blurred. Hard, quick edits and an unstable camera account for the action feel of the sequences. In the last flashback, which completes the film's story, it is finally revealed what exactly happened to Rode and his team. Revealed, indeed, since we finally see the only Afghan person the film will ever depict: a grim-looking thirteen-year old wielding a machine gun. We spot him together with Rode through the scope of his sniper gun, and after shooting at the convoy, killing Richard Seifert, the boy himself is shot by Rode.

⁵ See the appendix for a table of the main characters.

⁶ The one and only exception we are aware of is one black *Bundeswehr* soldier in a supporting role featured in *Tod eines Freundes*.

There are several points to be made here. The fact that Afghanistan is presented through a lens, the image distorted, might be attributed to cinematic conventions of dreams and visions, but nevertheless adds to the eerie mood 'there'. Even more so as the German part of the story is set in a neat suburban area, a small town idyll that is emphasised through repeated aerial shots. Since the sniper boy is the only Afghan person we see throughout the movie (actually, there is nothing there at all apart from the dust at the roadside), he becomes emblematic of the country.

Other films do provide images of Afghanistan. In *Willkommen zuhause* there are a number of sections that are set in the country. Just as in *Tod eines Freundes*, the image is colourised, giving it a distinct look. Apart from Ben Winter's flashbacks, which evolve in the course of the plot, we learn about Afghanistan mainly through Ben's diary entries. These are read from the off and illustrated with various scenes showing glimpses from the country or *Bundeswehr* soldiers at work. These scenes give a rather devastating impression of the country, as the following diary entry illustrates:

[E]verything is broken. There are no telephone cables, no electricity, no TV, no supermarkets, no chocolate and no beer. There's donkeys as main mode of transport, plastic bags as toys, for all that. Malaria, hepatitis, skin conditions and Russian machine guns, \$100 at every corner. (Willkommen zuhause, 00:23:29)

The images that support these sentences emphasise what is being said: We see a scattered society, broken dwellings and broken people, with *Bundeswehr* soldiers patrolling the streets, handing out sweets to the Afghan street children. The German military involvement in Afghanistan is portrayed as providing relief to this situation. We see a school class of smiling girls willing to study; relief aid being handed out to the population; and German soldiers providing security functions for the Afghan state.

In our third film, *Klick gemacht*, the Afghan is portrayed as stereotypical and cruel terrorist who recites 'Allahu akbar' while videotaping the assault on a *Bundeswehr* convoy. Especially when read together with the scene described above in *Willkommen zuhause*, the Afghan appears as wicked, ungrateful and irrational. The help that the German are providing is in this representation not only rejected: the benevolent Western helper himself is violently attacked by the Afghan. The impression is that the Afghans not only live in misery as a result of their war-torn history, they even seem unable to recover due to their inability to achieve and maintain a stable society.

This is a general pattern in these films: the gift of development and stability that the Germans offer to the Afghans is returned with violence. This renders the burden to stabilise Afghanistan to the white man. It is his responsibility to fight the Taliban for the sake of the Afghan school girls. This reasoning, supporting the Afghan population on moral grounds, depicts the military deployment of the *Bundeswehr* as a humanitarian effort. The following scene in *Tod eines Freundes* takes up exactly this train of thoughts:

[00:37:04] [Paul] [The soldiers in Afghanistan] ensure stability down there.

[00:37:08] [Tine] Through the use of arms?

[00:37:10] [Paul] Yes, through the use of arms! My God, sometimes it is the only way.

[00:37:12] [Tine] Are you so sure?

[00:37:14] [Paul] Yes, sometimes we don't live in an ideal world. They are training terrorists there, man! And don't even mention how the Taliban are treating their own people. You as a girl should care!

The *Bundeswehr* mission in Afghanistan is narrated here as an act of responsibility. This echoes the institutional discourse as summarised in the introduction. The humanitarian mission, however, cannot be carried out without violence. While the soldiers arrive in Afghanistan to provide relief in a humanitarian mission, they leave the country as combatants. Instead of building bridges and training policemen, they are forced to kill and see their comrades dying. This touches the very problem of the post-Cold War Federal Republic: how to reconcile its seemingly stable non-violent identity with the perceived reality in Afghanistan? This conflict is staged on the micro-level by means of the inner conflict of the German soldier. In our reading, the soldier is emblematic for Germany. So how do the soldiers deal with these tensions? While former defence minister Struck's statement implies that the support 'we' bring to Afghanistan is being exchanged for security, our texts seem to imply that things are not that simple. Instead, the war experience is represented by way of human relations of exchange which have a deep impact on the lives of the soldiers and their families.

Every film's story starts on or after the soldiers' return to Germany. This makes for some very interesting situations, as expectations and experiences of relatives at home and soldiers from abroad meet for the first time. *Willkommen zuhause* makes extensive use of these clashing expectations. Ben Winter is celebrated by his friends and family as a true war hero. A party is thrown, and everyone wants Ben to tell some exciting stories about his time in Afghanistan. But there is only room for certain stories: For his mother, a courageous soldier's mum, Ben returned home "safe and sound" (*Willkommen zuhause*, 00:03:47), before he is given the chance to report any of his differing experiences. She is proud of her son who, according to her, "has every reason to be happy" (*Willkommen zuhause*, 00:21:25). Ben's girlfriend Tine tries to talk to Ben about his experiences in Kunduz, but she asks superficial questions e.g. about the food. His friends, finally, want to celebrate their buddy as a war hero. For them, "a German soldier knows no fear" (*Willkommen zuhause*, 00:25:20). They want him to tell exciting war stories about Afghanistan, and, after all, "home is still the best place, right?" (*Willkommen zuhause*, 00:06:30). A very similar framing of the Afghanistan mission takes place at the homecoming party of David in *Nacht vor Augen*.

These scenes present a very straightforward representation of German society and its relation to Afghanistan. The idea that there is a riot going on, maybe even a war is rejected. The returning soldiers face a certain framing of what they have experienced in Afghanistan even before they have had any chance to tell their tale. They themselves are portrayed as indecisive: Both Ben and David want to celebrate with their family and friends, and they do not want to fail any expectations at their homecoming. But at the same time they are not comfortable with this particular representation of themselves and their mission. This in-between-status is evident with the behaviour of David who shows a photo presentation at his party. It is made up like a holiday photo series, rock music accompanies shots of smiling soldiers who wear sunglasses and wave their guns around. But when a pile of bodies comes up and David wants to talk about this other side of his experiences, he almost spoils the party. His friends shake their head, leave the room and it takes an intervention of David's girlfriend as host to get the party started again (*Nacht vor Augen*).

In these scenes, we find a strong desire to place a particular memory of the war experience as the legitimate narration. Soldiers' attempts to correct this legitimate memory are rebuked by a society that wants first of all to celebrate its heroes who fought in a just war for a good reason; for society, accepting the soldiers' memory might include reconsidering the hegemonic narrative of war. The

soldier thus poses a threat to this hegemonic discourse which leaves society with a good conscience to paraphrase Zehfuss (ZEHFUSS 2004).

These struggles about the right meaning of memory are also present in the veterans' accounts of their mission. Ben Winter's diary entries from his time in Afghanistan, which are interspersed in flashbacks throughout the film, are quite revealing in this respect. In these diary entries, Ben remembers talking to Afghan children who "rejoice over everything" (*Willkommen zuhause*, 00:24:32). Afghanistan is described as a war-torn country and the *Bundeswehr* mission's aim as "securing the fragile peace" (*Willkommen zuhause*, 00:24:20). What is pertinent here – in spite of the difficult situation in Afghanistan – is Ben's overall support of the military involvement as it is exemplified in the following diary entry:

Kunduz 24 October: There was an attack on the Canadians. All security measures have increased, as have the checks. Everything takes even longer now. Everything is more difficult. We're all scared shit. Torben calls Doro every day now. He just wants to go home. I still think being here and helping is the right thing to do. This country is so broken. It wasn't one war; there were more than 25 years of war. What difference do my four months make? At night, half dead in my sleeping bag. I want to be alone, think of Tine. Torben no longer snores. Now he speaks in his sleep. (Willkommen zuhause, 00:52:26)

In this diary entry shortly before the deadly assault happens, Ben reflects on the German involvement in Afghanistan critically but nevertheless supports the mission, even as the situation worsens. This critical but ultimately affirmative engagement with his mission is in line with the image that prevails in German society. The inherent tensions are not and, in our reading, could not be resolved at this point.

These short examples mirror the general feeling of German society towards the *Bundeswehr* mission in Afghanistan. Being part of the military mission stabilises Germany's identity as a responsible political actor in the international arena. Yet, any further knowledge about what exactly this might entail, and especially the possibility that there might be any consequences for German society itself, is unwanted if not outright rejected.

Rites of passage

In the following sections we take a closer look at the family as the central site where German identity is negotiated. In many ways, family relations are a central part of each of the films' stories. This may be in part due to genre conventions, as veteran stories tend to deal with people close to the returning soldiers. For our reading, however, family (read: the white, Christian nuclear family) is the central site where the Afghan experience is negotiated. Where *Tod eines Freundes* is almost exclusively concerned with the complex dealings of the Seifert and the Rode families, Ben Winter's story unfolds through his interactions with his parents and his (pregnant) girlfriend, the main location being the house they all live in together. *Klick gemacht* is driven by the actions of the veteran's families and the tension within the Steiger family, while *Nacht vor Augen* circles around the relationship between veteran David and his eight-year-old stepbrother Benni. These negotiations involve a complex and often painful process that is marked by a non-linear, eruptive development. Along the lines of the general theme of all films (see above), this process is divided into three main phases, which can be described in the classic phases of a rite of passage: separation, transition, incorporation (see GENNEP 1975, p. 21). The moment of crisis thus allows for a transition from one state or "relatively fixed or stable condition" (TURNER 1982, p. 93) to another. The transitional or liminal phase will be of special importance, as our reading is concerned with the transformation of German identity.

As the respective stories progress, the tensions between the returning soldiers and their environment become obvious. The rift between both sides, which was only hinted at in the opening scenes described above, becomes deeper to the point where every hero soldier performs a certain split with his peers. This act of **separation** happens on many different levels and features spatial, social, even sexual and emotional aspects. The strongest of such motifs, both in scope and in numbers, is the couple splitting up: Ben Winter moves to the basement, Frank Rode to the attic, David Kleinschmidt even leaves the flat altogether and moves to his old place. Lt. Darkow, finally, is separated by force, as he is abducted and held captive in the middle of a remote forest, but his wife later confesses to the investigators that she was about to leave him, too.⁷

These splits are but the obvious results of the returning soldiers' separation from their surroundings and especially their families on the social level. This alienation, as every social process, is facilitated both through the actions of the heroes themselves and their social environment. On the soldiers' part, their actions are a mix of conscious rejection of their representation as heroes and unconscious, instinctive behaviour resulting from trauma. As family relations are concerned, we witness an ongoing alienation of the partners. The mismatch of societal representation and experience results in soldiers' sexual dysfunction, occasional outbursts of domestic violence and a growing inability to talk and to relate to their partners. The separation is thus presented as a logical, maybe evident next step. The soldier becomes a loner, who takes extensive training runs in the woods (Ben/*Willkommen zuhause*), sits in his flat endlessly watching children's cartoons (David/*Nacht vor Augen*), or builds a shelter in the forest (Frank/*Tod eines Freundes*). Even if it might have appeared at first glance that some of the young soldiers have 'grown up' in the war (Ben/*Willkommen zuhause*, David/*Nacht vor Augen*), it turns out that they are unable to fulfil the expectations of their respective environment.

This retreat, this separation from society is the precondition for the **transitional** or liminal phase, "a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few [...] of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states" (TURNER 1982, p. 24). Following Turner's classic interpretation (see esp. TURNER 1970), it is the phase of any transition ritual that is the most important, for it is this state of in-betweenness which is necessary for the re-incorporation into society. In the cases of the returning German veteran, this phase is influenced by his memories, a certain way of remembrance of the Afghanistan mission, by which the soldiers are able to reintegrate into their society.

At this stage the veterans are finally able to narrate their stories independent of the way in which it was framed before. All of them suffer from some kind of trauma which results from their shocking experiences in Afghanistan. In all cases, a serious breakdown precedes the act of narration, as the decisions the soldiers were forced to make in Afghanistan still haunt them after their return.

Every story is told to third persons for the first time: to an army psychoanalyst in *Willkommen zuhause*, to a pub drinking party in *Nacht vor Augen*, to the camera in *Klick gemacht* and to psychoanalyst Bloch in *Tod eines Freundes*. In this case, it is finally revealed in the final psychotherapy session that Rode killed an Afghan child soldier who shot his friend Seifert. While Rode's flashbacks had earlier shown more and more about what happened in Afghanistan, the fact that the Afghan sniper was a child is only revealed at the very end. It is not entirely clear if Rode's

⁷ Again, it would be very interesting to study the role of women in these processes of transformation, see WEBER 2006. While the main characters of the films seem to be the soldiers, we would argue that their wives/girlfriends/fiancées are as much part of the process as the male characters.

trauma stems from the fact that he killed a child or rather from his hesitation to shoot. Rode believes his hesitation enabled the sniper to kill his friend Seifert before he could take guard. However, in the end, Bloch, a liberal pacifist, reassures Rode that his hesitation was not weakness but rather a sign of his humanity: “Even though horrible things happened in Afghanistan. I am glad that there was this hesitation in you” (*Tod eines Freundes*, 01:23:20).

The fact that the memory of the war is highly contested is one of the key themes in *Klick gemacht*. Here, Lt. Rolf Darkow does not narrate his memories voluntarily; his confession results from torture as he is forced to stand on a land mine for hours, alone in a middle of a deserted forest. He had also made a decision, and took an unnecessary risk that resulted in the bombing of a convoy: He is responsible for the deaths of three soldiers.

"We only wanted to prove that progress was being made... To the people there and the world we wanted to prove that everything is right there... [...] One needs to follow orders, follow orders... I am a good soldier... We only obeyed..." (Klick gemacht, 01:08:00)

But with this confession to the camera – and to us – there is no real catharsis, no memory effect. The ‘truth’ is narrated, but it is not publicly displayed; instead, the army covers the story up in order to prevent bad publicity about the mission. Problems occur because the army wants to deliver ‘good news’ instead of recognising that war is dangerous and ultimately costs lives. Instead we see a cold-blooded careerist who is even able to capitalise on his superiors’ willingness to drop him in order to cover up the story. In *Klick gemacht*, the war in Afghanistan is literally “a career”, to quote Balfour in Said (SAID 1978/1995). The army is represented as a cold and inhuman organization, which does not narrate the true story, but only reproduces flowery phrases. Accordingly, notions of German responsibility, statements about the necessity of Germany’s military involvement in Afghanistan abound (e.g. Col. Steiger, Cpt. Steiger, the relatives of the victims).

Once the soldiers decide to narrate their traumatic experiences, they receive redemption for what they did (or could not do) in Afghanistan. Recounting their story takes the form of a confession; soldiers who tell their stories are redeemed. But if the true story is not revealed, redemption cannot take place.

Finally, following the liminal state, there is the phase of **incorporation** which “includes symbolic phenomena and actions which represent the return of the subjects to their new, relatively stable, well-defined position in the total society” (TURNER 1982, 24). The theme of reconciliation within the families, however implicit it has been dealt with before, is expressed clearly at the end of the respective stories. But it is dependent on the correct recollection of the events in Afghanistan.

Tod eines Freundes culminates in the psychoanalysis session of Rode, where he recalls the true story of the assault. It is worth spelling out the following sequence in some detail:⁸

⁸ Even more so as this is the final sequence of the main story: The final scene is relevant only for the series’ main character, Psychologist Bloch, and is thus deemed not relevant for our context.

- [01:24:00] *The last shot of the psychoanalysis session, Frank Rode has broken down and is crying.*
- [01:24:09] *The now-familiar aerial view of the orderly suburban quarter.*
- [01:24:27] *Frank Rode, in his provisional room in the attic. He is moving out, packing his belongings into a box. Bloch looks through the open door, but does not interrupt. Just as Rode takes Afghanistan photographs from the wall, smiling, his daughter Tina enters the room. They hug silently.*
- [01:25:18] *Outside the Seifert house: Paul Seifert, in camouflage, with his mother and Tina. Another young soldier waits in a nearby car. Paul and Tina embrace and kiss, he whispers something in her ear. Then he waves goodbye to his mother and leaves in the car.*

This is a very strong chain of events, evoking some apparent messages. After psychoanalysis, the Rode family is reunited again in their petty-bourgeois home. As the separate bedroom policy is revoked, veteran Frank can leave his exile in the attic and join his wife again. His incorporation into his family seems complete, even more so as it is somewhat mirrored on the level of the younger generation. Things seem to be good again for the Seiferts, as well. Paul follows his convictions and joins the army without objections from neither his wary mother nor from Tina, the pacifist. In fact, Tina and Paul seem to be an item now, a future family-to-be that contributes to the *Bundeswehr* efforts.

This solution all but parallels the ending of *Willkommen zuhause*. As Ben leaves hospital after his treatment, he is picked up by Tine. Their rift seems to be over, too, as she returns to Ben. She has been pregnant all along, but now it is very visible, which reinforces the impression that *Tod eines Freundes* only hinted at: here is another new family, a new generation of Germans who have learned to deal with their past, and are using this memory to accept their responsibilities and endure the hardships that such responsible behaviour necessarily entails.

Klick gemacht, on the other hand, ends with a rift, and many veteran families remain shattered, not able to cope with their experiences. The widow who speaks out against the hegemonic discourse at the military memorial service (“They are dead... Whom for? What for? For our security, for our freedom... Sure! What a fucking lie, you make me sick [...]!” *Klick gemacht*, 00:03:02) is a drunk; the Wegener family even turns to crime in their attempt to make sense of their son’s death. And there is the Steigers, yet another family with a long military tradition. But daughter Uli quits the *Bundeswehr* after discovering that her father (and superior) has suppressed the truth about the assault for political reasons. The Steiger family breaks apart as Uli realises that her father worked against her in order to conceal the true story. Step one, the narration of the memory, does not take place. The ‘true’ nature of war is revealed to the audience through the soldiers’ flashbacks, but the story is not uncovered as the soldiers’ suffering is concealed from the public. Therefore, there is no healing for the soldiers. Only a survivor of the assault, who is mistakenly suspected of being involved in Darkow’s abduction, confesses at one point in time that he shot his mortally wounded friend to release him from his pain. Apart from this, the characters remain with their traumatic memories. *Nacht vor Augen* is left with a broken narration, as well. Furthermore, the publicised version of David’s story is rather different from the true events. The fact that David shot an Afghan child is – as in the other films – untold at first, when it is finally narrated at the pub, it is at first going nearly unnoticed. David’s inner conflict is over after he

returns from psychiatric treatment although we do not really know if it was successful. In both cases, there is no memory effect as the true narration is not recognised by society.

Self/other

The tangible identity relation of self vs. other has up to now been presented as a neat difference. In this last part of the paper it is time to turn to the interrelatedness, the mutual constitutive aspects of these seemingly oppositional identities. For the narrative which the material presents can be retold as a classic example of an Orientalist theme: that the discursive construction of the Other, Lacan's *grande-autre* (LACAN 1968), implies necessarily constructing the self. Germany gives something to Afghanistan – stability, protection, development – but this is only part of the story. Contact with some other, embodied in the material by German soldiers on a mission in Afghanistan, does not only alter the other (e.g. stabilise Afghanistan), it also works on the self, the discursive identity of Germany. Afghanistan constitutes an exchange relation in which Germany receives something back, a fact that is slowly dawning on the German families. This exchange – giving soldiers, receiving stability – constitutes an exchange relation which does not stop at the material level.

The veteran embodies this exchange. In our material, the German soldiers in Afghanistan are represented as tragic and vulnerable figures who cannot cope with the situations they find themselves in. These war situations come close to Jacques Derrida's notion of an aporia. An aporia constitutes a non-passage, a situation where a moral decision is impossible (DERRIDA 1993). But even though an aporia has no correct moral answer, it nonetheless demands a decision (ZEHFUSS 2004). This is highlighted in *Tod eines Freundes*: The flashback scene in which Rode decides to kill the thirteen year old to protect his fellow soldiers constitutes the ultimate aporia situation; this is Derrida's inescapable dilemma.

The experience of the aporia situation has a deep impact on the German soldiers (and, by extension, their families). In part, it is even physically ingrained on the body of the soldier (e.g. in the mutilated veterans in *Klick gemacht* and *Tod eines Freundes*). The fact that images of both self and other are in flux is exemplified in the films on different levels. During their transition phase, it seems that the war experience literally haunts the returned soldiers. Visions of killed children and dying comrades abound. In *Tod eines Freundes*, for example, veteran Frank Rode is confronted with an Indian-looking businessman in a hotel lobby. Rode, who has yet to come to terms with his traumatic experiences, feels threatened by the businessman's looks and literally incorporates him into a memory from the Afghan battlefield, visualised in flashbacks. After noticing the man, the first flashback shows a young soldier firing a machine gun at the viewer, which by itself is a strong connotation. The next flashback, however, literally strips the man from his suit and puts him into a *kaftan* and a scarf. The scene ends with Rode attacking his opponent, in fiction as in reality (*Tod eines Freundes*, 00:35:20 f.). In *Nacht vor Augen*, the distinction between Germany and Afghanistan collapses in David's visions to the extent that the main character's reality becomes a constant in-between. This is visually represented in David's little brother Benni, who – for David – seems to transform several times into the Afghan child.

But it is not only the soldiers that have changed: As they have to be re-integrated upon return, it is troubling both for the soldiers themselves and for their environment. This point is very well illustrated by Tine, Ben's girlfriend in *Willkommen zuhause*: "I thought you would come back and everything would be the same as before. I thought we could pick up where we left off."

(00:41:48). This is a leitmotif all through the films, e.g. Ben Winter's mother in *Willkommen zuhause*: "I don't want your goddamn war in my house, I want my peace!" (00:52:11). Yet, especially those films like *Nacht vor Augen* or *Klick gemacht* which do not leave the audience with an easy closure of events, which avoid the happy ending suggest that peace might not be easily available. If a good conscience can be obtainable at all, then only for the price of forgetting. In order to remember the horror of war and one's own suffering properly, one must forget about the suffering of the other. In order to live on in peace, we must forget about the dead, even if it was for their aid that war was declared in the first place. Memory and suffering are reserved for the German soldiers. It is their suffering which is re-presented in German popular culture. The other, being the Afghan child soldier (in *Tod eines Freundes*), the de-humanised 'terrorists' (in *Klick gemacht*) or the Afghan people at large (in *Willkommen zuhause*) are merely the extras who colour the master narrative which is staged in the films.

In *Willkommen zuhause* and *Tod eines Freundes*, the Afghan experience is eventually accepted – both by the soldiers and society. These films can be regarded as a classic coming-of-age narrative. Having completed his rite of passage, the returning soldier accepts his deeds and therefore re-appears as a man who can cope with the evil spirits that haunt him. Having undergone this maturation process, the soldier is re-presented as responsible husband and elder brother, as father and head of family. Orientalist discourses have an important function in this respect: they deliver the good cause which apparently sanctions the German military involvement in Afghanistan. Orientalist stereotypes serve as discursive resources which legitimise the deployment of the *Bundeswehr* as apparently a good and meaningful cause. The mission itself is represented as 'humanitarian,' as a 'stabilization mission,' which nevertheless entails distress and loss. Popular culture re-presents this distress as inevitable and ultimately justifiable, if not justified. Killing a child soldier, shooting a dying comrade, or simply surviving while a friend died, are acknowledged as inevitable consequences of war.

It is surprising how pro-active Germany's popular culture deals with these issues today which constituted a taboo for Germany's foreign policy for decades after the end of World War II.

According to our reading of the films, popular culture representations of Germany as a state that uses force in international relations seem to parallel the post-Cold War debate on the German *sonderweg*. In our films, this problematique is represented metaphorically as a coming-of-age story in which the young accept their responsibility to go to war in order to bring stability to the world, fight terrorism or 'save brown women from brown men' (SPIVAK 1988). Only the proper remembrance re-establishes the dichotomies between here and there (Frank Rode/Ben Winter). The missing of a true narration or the 'wrong recollection' of events makes for unclear identities, which leaves these tensions unresolved (David/Darkow).

Conclusion

Our close reading of these texts enables us to identify three central aspects: (1) we trace an Orientalist master narrative that offers, among others, apparently clear-cut representations of self and other which serve to legitimate political action; (2) the nuclear family is presented as site of struggles where German society is confronted (and has to reason) with the Afghan experience embodied by the returning soldier and his coming-of-age; (3) the right memory and proper remembrance of this experience are considered as the solution to these various conflicts.

At first sight, all four films re-present the decisions of the German soldiers – and by extension the effects of the Federal Republic of Germany's military intervention in Afghanistan – as painful. After having confessed, the soldiers' actions in these films are re-presented as the only way to act. They are asserted that they actually had no choice but to act, to kill, or simply to survive. The acknowledgement of the soldiers' decisions as inevitable, their re-presentation as legitimate and without alternatives redeems their guilt and enables a memory of the war which is ultimately righteous and just. If the memory is not narrated properly, the re-presentation cannot take place. The memory of what happened cannot be made newly present as part of a legitimating narrative that redeems the soldiers' decisions in Afghanistan. In these cases, the soldiers stay in their liminal phases of in-between and remain with their traumatic memories. However, the general pattern in our films can be interpreted as redemption through confession: If memories are narrated properly, a new re-presentation of the story can take place. This move enables a re-signification of what the events mean to the soldiers and their families. This enables Ben Winter to be the hero that his family and friends want him to be; it reconciles Frank Rode with his guilt, and enables Paul to join the army – out of his conviction of taking responsibility.

The fact that popular culture remembers the suffering of German soldiers at all is already a surprising finding – especially when compared with the statements of German politicians who are at pain not to call what is going on in Afghanistan a war. However, such an omission of the other's view is typical for an Orientalist discourse. In all our material, the Afghans cannot represent themselves. Instead, they are represented by the benign and responsible Germans who want to bring stability to the Afghans, build schools or save the Afghan women from the Taliban. It is the special othering remembrance, though, which reconciles Germany with its Afghan experience. The veterans embody this experience – and carry it home with them. Afghanistan, our films suggest, might not be a one-way street where German families just send their sons out to help some remote brown people.

To conclude, we found that popular culture draws on Orientalist discourses to frame the German military mission in Afghanistan as good and necessary. This may well be retrieved in other contexts outside Germany. However, in the particular case of Germany, the Orientalist discourse is of special importance as the Germans are still struggling with their past. In order for this to happen, the voice of the other, in our case: the Afghan people, needs to be deferred. It seems ironic that a country which Said neglected in his seminal study on Orientalism (SAID 1978/1995) due to its lack of a colonial past now relies on Orientalist narratives to go to war. However, drawing on Orientalist stereotypes allows the German military deployment to be represented as a just war. This is of crucial political importance: as Orientalist discourses endow the use of military violence with political legitimacy, Germany can reconcile itself with its past and with the current war.

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Appendix

Chart of characters

Tod eines Freundes	Klick gemacht	Willkommen zuhause	Nacht vor Augen
<p><i>Frank Rode, Afghanistan veteran</i></p> <p><i>Tina, Frank's daughter, anti-war militant</i></p> <p><i>Richard Seifert, killed in Afghanistan</i></p> <p><i>Paul, Richard's son, wants to join the army</i></p> <p><i>Maximilian Bloch, psychologist</i></p>	<p><i>Lieutenant Darkow, Afghanistan veteran, is abducted</i></p> <p><i>Uli Steiger, military police captain</i></p> <p><i>Colonel Steiger, her father, military intelligence</i></p> <p><i>Friedl Papen, police inspector</i></p>	<p><i>Ben Winter, Afghanistan veteran;</i></p> <p><i>Tine, Ben's girlfriend</i></p> <p><i>Torben, Ben's friend, killed in Afghanistan</i></p> <p><i>Torben's father</i></p>	<p><i>David Kleinschmidt, Afghanistan veteran;</i></p> <p><i>Kirsten, David's girlfriend</i></p> <p><i>Benni, David's brother</i></p>