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## Trabajo Fin de Grado

THE ALL-SEEING EYE: SURVEILLANCE, THE  
WATCHFUL LOOK AND MILITARIZATION IN  
*STATE OF PLAY*

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## **1. – Introduction**

*State of Play* is a U.S. film, directed by Kevin Macdonald and released in April 2009. It is a remake of David Yates's six-episode miniseries of the same title broadcast by the British television channel BBC in the summer of 2003.

The film, in medias res, starts with a small-time crook on the run looking constantly over his shoulder. He hides under a tunnel and is finally gunned down by his pursuer: an anonymous man carrying a suitcase. A delivery pizza-boy, who was passing by, is also shot by that man and left unconscious. The following day, at an underground station, a red-haired woman, Sonia Baker (Maria Thayer), is given a hefty shove, falls onto the tracks and is killed by a passing train. These are, apparently, two unrelated events. Later on that very same day, Congressman Stephen Collins (Ben Affleck) breaks down in front of the cameras when he finds out about the death of Sonia Baker, who was his research assistant as well as his lover. As the Congressman's affair with the victim goes viral, Stephen visits his old friend Cal McAffrey (Russell Crowe), a journalist, looking for a place to hide from the public eye. Along with a novice reporter Della Frye (Rachel McAdams), Cal starts an investigation, which soon starts to uncover that there may be some direct links between the murders and some government and corporate figures. As the intricacies of the film start unfolding, PointCorp, a mysterious organization that uses military staff for surveillance purposes, comes into scene. It soon emerges that this organization is trying to privatize Homeland Security from the federal government in an attempt to monopolize it.

Unlike the British original version, which revolves around fuel sources, this 2009 film chooses the topic of Homeland Surveillance for its thriller plot. The choice of this background topic does not seem incidental since it brings this remake closer to a trend of films concerned with the changes in U.S. politics after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In this essay, I am going to analyse *State of Play* as a post-9/11 film and, as a

result, as reflecting some of the socio-political changes brought about by the September 11 attacks. In order to do that, I will use textual analysis to explore the visual and narrative mechanisms the film uses to carry out a critique of some of the surveillance measures implemented after the attacks.

## **2. – The War on Terror**

The 9/11 terrorists attacks in 2001 hit a milestone in the history of mankind. They dramatically altered the course of U.S. history and, as a result, that of the rest of the world. On that fateful day, which for many marked the official beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, al-Qaida terrorists hijacked four commercial planes and flew them into targets in U.S. soil: the World Trade Center towers in New York City, the Department of Defence in Washington and a third target that was never confirmed. These events soon ushered in a new era of endless war, bombing and civilian deaths. A month later, the United States declared war and invaded Afghanistan as a response, looking for the Taliban al-Qaida terrorists that had organised the attacks. The leader of these Islamic terrorists, Osama bin Laden, was their main target. Several months later, in 2003, President George Bush accused Iraq of possessing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and attacked the country (Westwell 2014: 1).

On 9/11 the United States of America were, for the first time in its history, attacked on its mainland. As a result of this unprecedented attack, the mythical constructions of the terms “nation” and “homeland” were, for millions of U. S. citizens, drastically transformed. This homeland was no longer “a site of familial security, marked off from the dangers of the world ‘out there’” since violence and destruction now were taking place at home. The idea of homeland as “a safe national space in which citizens can feel safe and secure from the realities of an anarchic world” disappeared overnight (Carter and Dodds 2014: 98). This transformation gave way to a feeling of

uneasiness that resulted in the enactment and implementation of laws and measures aimed at monitoring citizens and activities both inside and outside the country (Westwell 2014: 1). A clear example of law enforcement is the Patriot Act (it stands for “Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001”), passed immediately after the terrorist attacks (September 11, 2001). In general terms, this law gave more power to some security companies, promulgated new crimes and terrorist offences were hardened (Doyle 2001: 2). Vigilance became one of the main practices of the newly inaugurated War on Terror.

Popular culture and the cinema were also tremendously conditioned by the terrorist attacks and the events that followed them. As Simpson (in Westwell 2014: 1) points out: 9/11 “both reproduced and refigured culture”. No sooner had the so-called War on Terror begun than several producers and executives from the most important Hollywood studios were summoned at the White House. They were urgently requested to foster a specific cultural background in their films that would comply with a specific political ideology (Westwell 2014: 8). In a direct or indirect manner, films should call for the war against terrorism and for the support of U.S. citizens. In the war films released right after 9/11, like *Black Hawk Down* (Ridley Scott, 2002) or *Behind Enemy Lines* (John Moore, 2001), U.S. citizens were portrayed as victims and the intervention of military forces in foreign countries such as Afghanistan or Iraq was morally justified. Additionally, those allusive elements to 9/11, e.g. the Twin Towers, ought to be withdrawn from the films in a move that resembles the propaganda and patriotic strategies used in films made during World War II. Conversely, the release of films that were felt to promote anti-patriotic feelings was held back, as was the case of *The Quiet American* (Phillip Noyce, 2002) (see Westwell 2014: 10).

However, this homogeneous attitude regarding these issues did not last long. Soon, other critical stances started to emerge. According to Guy Westwell, post-9/11 films dealing with international politics were characterized by two opposing ideologies, struggling for hegemony and control. On the one hand, there were films fostering a political and war commitment to the government such as *Collateral Damage* (Phil Andrew Davis, 2002), *Man on Fire* (Tony Scott, 2004) or *United 93* (Paul Greengrass, 2006). On the other hand, films like *Michael Clayton* (Tony Gilroy, 2007), *Taxi to the Dark Side* (Alex Gibney, 2007) or *The Dictator* (Larry Charles, 2012), started to reflect a complex wide range of political positions. In like manner, documentary films like *The Blood of My Brother* (Andrew Berends, 2005), *Iraq in Fragments* (James Longley, 2006), or *My Country, My Country* (Laura Poitras, 2006) were concerned with the emergence of an anti-war movement. This second trend is supposed to have paved the way for the change in presidency that took place when Barack Obama, the head of the Democratic party, was elected President of the United States in 2008. Obama's turn towards progressive politics came to replace Bush's neoliberalism and right-wing politics.

The issues raised by these films and the way in which they were dealt with also affected box-office results. As Riegler (2014: 9) points out, "audiences preferred indirect approaches to overly political ones". Films tackling these issues in a very direct manner were likely to become resounding box-office flops. In this industrial context, *State of Play*'s box-office takings were relatively acceptable. These results were, however, far behind those of the titles at the top of the list when the film was released such as *Monsters vs. Aliens* (Rob Letterman, Conrad Vernon, 2009), *Fast & Furious* (Justin Lin, 2009) or *17 Again* (Butt Steers, 2009) (Gant 2009). The relative success of the film at the box-office is probably due to the fact that *State of Play* copes with war issues in an oblique manner since other films dealing in a more direct way with the Iraq

war were commercial failures. This was, for instance, the case of *In the Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis, 2007) or *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008). In spite of that, the general press and film critics in general greeted these films, including *State of Play*, with high acclaim (Jennings 2009).

*State of Play* deals with war issues in an indirect manner. Yet, the sense of vigilance that emerged as a result of the terrorist attacks permeates the whole film. In this essay, I am going to explore the film's emphasis on surveillance and militarization. It is my claim in this essay that the film's thematic interest in this issue (PointCorp and Homeland Surveillance) is mirrored by the stylistic and narrative devices used by the film.

### **3. – *State of Play***

#### **3.1. – Homeland under Siege**

According to Richard Barsam (2007: 337), establishing shots “orient the viewer for the shots that follow. They serve as the foundation for [...] a sequence of shots by showing the location of ensuing action”. As he argues, filmmakers have conventionally used establishing shots as a way of opening films in which the setting is predominant (337). This is the case of *State of Play*, which provides a portrayal of the city of Washington by means of these particular shots. As the film starts, for instance, we see an aerial extreme long shot of the city at night. This city is presented as a very lively and vibrant place; we are able to see the lights of hundreds of cars coming and going and different lights that might belong to different buildings, houses, etc.

Amidst all the hustle and bustle, there is a key element, barely seen in the background, which elucidates the setting of the film. This figure is an obelisk, officially known as the Washington Monument. As the name of the monument indicates, the setting where the action of the film takes place is in Washington, D.C., the capital of the

United States. Afterwards, there is another establishing shot that allows the audience to see this illuminated city from a straight-on angle. This is a rainy day in which the road is full of cars and other means of transport. There are people dangerously crossing the streets whereas others are peacefully walking along them. This shot depicts an ordinary day and everyday people in any street of this city. These are different images from the film's Washington, as the home of political institutions and organisms that the audience easily recognizes.

In *State of Play*, establishing shots are not only used at the beginning of the film but they are repeated throughout the whole film. These establishing shots show two sides of Washington. As can be seen in figures 1 and 2, the film presents the non-political side of the city by means of shots of less known parts of the city such as Maine Avenue Fish Market, the Georgetown Embankment of Potomac river bank and even a small neighbourhood known as Chinatown. Director Macdonald himself claims that this



Figure 1

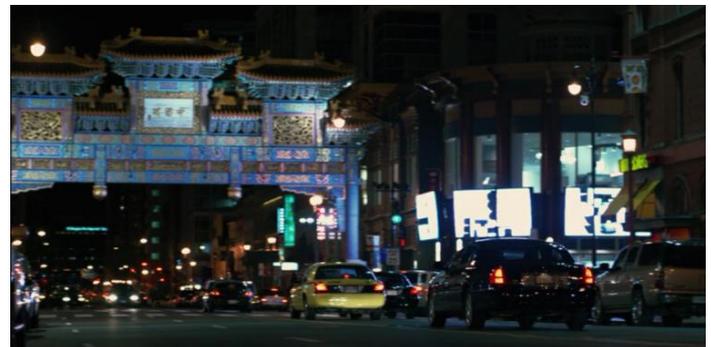


Figure 2

choice of location when making the film, was “to try to take the audience into a world they are unfamiliar with” (Witmer 2009: 38). By showing these unconventional places, the film is showing cultural, geographical and historical traits of the city of Washington. These shots highlight the long-standing tradition of fishing in the area (the city is near the Chesapeake Bay). In like manner, we can see the Potomac River that crosses Washington and flows into Chesapeake Bay. Washington could be said to be a

multicultural city in the sense that it gathers different ethnic groups; one of the most visible communities is the Chinese one, which can also be seen in the film.

On the other hand, the film also includes the city's political side by means of other establishing shots that show the familiar monuments and political buildings of Washington. Macdonald refers to the other side of the city: "The world of this film is very familiar – it's Washington, it's politics" (38). The shots show "Andrew W. Mellon Auditorium", where the office of Congressman Stephen Collins is and "John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts", which is near the Watergate complex, the United States Congress and the Obelisk. These two types of establishing shots are interspersed throughout the film. In them, Washington is portrayed as an ordinary U.S. city. However, it could be said that Washington has a slight difference when compared to other U.S. cities: it is the capital city of the United States of America, the city where all state organisms and institutions are located, home of the White House and the US Congress. This city has got a remarkable political character.

What many of these establishing shots have in common is the more or less visible presence of a helicopter hovering in the sky. In the film, this particular means of transport can either be one with the setting or rather stand on its own. Helicopters are seen flying over Washington and passing by different parts and landmarks of the city. In this post-9/11 context of the War on Terror, the helicopter has become a recurrent presence patrolling the city day and night since now the danger of terrorism lurks in the homeland. In a homeland "under siege", vigilant approaches, as Ewald claims are "particularly geared to the anticipation of events" (in Amoore 2007: 216). They function as a preventive measure towards a potential attack.

These helicopter shots<sup>1</sup> could be read in the light of Samuel Bentham's notion of the Panopticon. In their essay on "The Panopticon's Changing Geography", Dobson and Fisher (2007: 307-8) distinguish three types: Panopticon I, devised by Bentham, refers to a designed building; Panopticon II, created by George Orwell, consists of a television network; finally, Bentham's Panopticon III is associated with "all sorts of electronic surveillance, from video coverage to [...] library checkouts and credit-card transactions" (309). According to the function helicopters perform in this film, they could be included in the third type since Panopticon III has been practically used as a tool for improving safety and security systems (311). Nevertheless, it has been also suggested that Panopticon III allows the watcher to indiscriminately keep track of the watched. This is the moment when this recurrent presence of helicopters becomes a looming one. Figures 3 and 4 are other instances of helicopter shots. In figure 3, the helicopter is framed beyond the flag of the United States. The U.S. flag conjures up the notion of national identity and patriotism. In other words, what it is to be a citizen of the



Figure 3



Figure 4

United States. This metaphorically means that using these helicopters with the aim of watching over and fighting the war on terror is merely an excuse to flout citizens' rights, freedoms and guarantees, namely their privacy. Figure 4 revolves around the same idea,

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<sup>1</sup> Even if the term "helicopter shot" is traditionally used to refer to overhead shots taken from a helicopter, in this essay, for the sake of clarity, I will be using the term to refer to shots showing a helicopter regardless of whether they are taken from another helicopter or not.

it shows the image of the helicopter reflected on a glass window. Not only is the helicopter surfing the skies but now it is as if it was inside the building. It possesses the legitimate power to suddenly enter a place without asking for permission. The helicopter is a key element used by the film in order to convey the general atmosphere of surveillance that I will analyse in more detail in the next section.

### **3.2. – The Watchful Look**

In her analysis of the 2000 film *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2004), Louise Amoore (2007: 216) has analysed the role of a formal and thematic features she refers to as “the watchful look”. As she puts it: “the watchful look is present in its many (dis)guises – through windows and windshields, via glances at passers-by in hoodies or hijab [...]”. The emphasis is on the spontaneous look of a person. As I will argue in this section, this “watchful look” is also systematically presented in *State of Play* by means of different features: point of view shots, long takes, shots of random characters looking off-screen, eye-line matches and the use of television screen shots.

Barsam (2007: 347) explains that: “point-of-view editing is the editing of subjective shots that show a scene exactly the way the character sees it”. In a point-of-view shot, the camera is exactly placed where the character, whose point of view we share, stands. They are traditionally used to enhance spectators’ identification with the character whose point of view we are sharing. In *State of Play*, however, P.O.V. shots seem to be used in a different way. Instead of identification with the looker, they provide a pervading, and sometimes disturbing, atmosphere of vigilance and of “being-looked-at-ness”. Near the beginning of the film, we see Cal and detective Bell (Harry Lennix) at a crime scene. In figure 5, a P.O.V. shot frames them in a high angle and through a rail, which highlights the feeling that they are being observed. This point of view belongs to Mandi, the girlfriend of the murdered crook and, as we will find later

on, a harmless player in the film's power game. Yet, the sense of vigilantism and being spied on has already been activated. Mandi's look contributes to the widespread atmosphere of surveillance. This P.O.V. shot is an example of the film's "watchful look" and P.O.V. shots like this are common in the film.

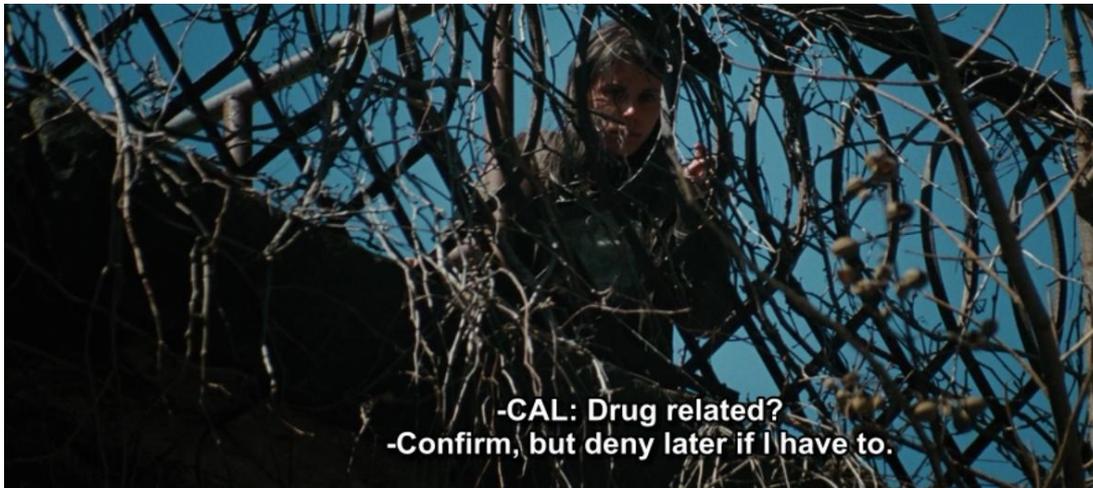


Figure 5

Similarly, long takes also contribute to this feeling of continuous monitoring. Barsam (2007: 258) describes a long take as a shot that lasts longer than average. A clear example of this can be seen at the very beginning of the film. From the moment Sonia Baker leaves her home, every step she takes is carefully from a distance in a long take. Even though the agent of the look is not shown, the audience soon identifies this "watchful look" as a potential menace to the person that is being observed.

"The watchful look" is also created by different random shots of ordinary people looking off-screen in a suspicious way. This "watchful look" belongs to people who are extras. They happen to be pedestrians, apparently carrying out their everyday tasks. At first sight, their looks may not be relevant for the plotline. However, special attention must be given to them. Unlike the P.O.V. shots mentioned above, they do not show the person or object that is being look at but they convey a certain degree of apprehension or hostility to whatever and whoever these people are looking at.

This “watchful look” might also be used to play with people’s expectations. The two shots shown in figures 6 and 7 do not follow the pattern of the two previous examples since it is an eye-line match. Bordwell and Thompson (1990: 235) explain that the effect created by eye-line match is that “the actor seems to be looking at whatever we see in the next shot and the audience assumes the actor reacts accordingly”. In figure 6, Dominique Foy (Jason Bateman) is engaged in a conversation



Figure 6



Figure 7

with Cal when he looks off-screen. Immediately, there is a shot, which is figure 7, showing what Dominique was seeing. The object of Dominique’s look happens to be just an ordinary man who was sitting next to him at another table. At first sight, spectators may think this extra is being introduced as another character and he is going to make his contribution to the film’s convoluted plot. Conversely, these expectations are not met as no information is provided about this person. Spectators’ lack of awareness towards these people may point out to the fact that they are the actual sufferers of surveillance measures. As their lives are unreasonably being shown to the audience, these extras are an example of the invasion of privacy that was in the air as a consequence of 9/11 and the Patriot Act. Anyone could have happened to be controlled in public places such as a restaurant, a market or even in the streets.

It is remarkable to note that all these formal features happen to emphasize the same thematic feature: surveillance. Highlighting an ordinary and everyday action such

as looking becomes unsettling as the observed people either do not notice they are being watched (as happens to Cal, the detective or Sonia Baker) or react with suspicion towards this constant feeling of vigilance. What is common to all the formal features mentioned above is the invasion of privacy and the way in which the film's emphasis on the act of looking creates feelings of suffocation, anxiety and even paranoia.

### **3.- Stephen Collins**

The disturbing “watchful look” in *State of Play* is also represented through the pervasive use of television cameras and is connected to the character of Stephen Collins. Mateus (2014: 263) highlights the impact of television on everyday life: “the actions and events reported on those media become visible to a larger number of individuals which may be found scattered across the planet”. This, in turn, brings about the concept of mediatisation, which could be defined as “the influence media exert on a variety of phenomena” (Hjarvard 2008: 106). The field of politics was one of the first areas to make use of the media to get the exposure they need to win an election or to present a particular image to the public. In the context of the film, this mediatisation process affects mainly the character of Congressman Stephen Collins. Hundreds of cameras follow Stephen Collins wherever he goes. As was mentioned before, when his affair with Sonia goes viral, he hides from the public eye in the apartment of his friend Cal, who, ironically, is a journalist but one that, as we find out later on, has protected his university roommate on the journal that he works for, *The Washington Globe*. Stephen Collins is closely watched by the media but also uses the media to clean his reputation after his affair with Sonia is made public.

Congressman Collins finds himself in the middle of a scandal that has tarnished his reputation. In an attempt to regain his political credibility, he makes use of the media. As can be seen in figure 8, Congressman Collins and his wife Anne Collins

(Robin Wright) give a press conference to deny their marital crisis and convey an idyllic image of their private life. Just by being in front of the camera, they are establishing face-to-face communication with the citizens as if they were telling them personally that Stephen's affair was just a mistake and that their relationship is even stronger than before.



Figure 8

It has been argued that there is an overlapping of the public and private life in politics as a result of changes that politics has experienced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Mateus 2014: 266). Congressman Collins mixes both lives when he makes his love affair with Sonia public in front of the cameras. Bringing both lives together is connected with the idea of visibility. Being a politician in the public eye might entail gaining followers as well as becoming involved in scandals. This is when the media come into play. Media create charismatic representations of a politician by exhibiting his/her private life. The radio and television, among others, help politicians build up some familiarity with the viewers by looking at the camera and establishing face to face communication (Mateus 2014: 266-8). This use of the media adds another meaning to the film's pervasive "watchful look": it is precisely because of the existence of a watchful look, which is

constantly monitoring citizens' lives and even more in the case of public figures, that a character like Stephen Collins can try to use "the public eye" to his advantage.

In the opening scenes of the film, Stephen Collins is introduced as a Congressman. He has been elected to be a candidate for the Presidential elections. Middle-aged, nice-looking and unruffled, he represents the new generations who have a new way of understanding and doing politics, breaking way with the previous politicians. All eyes are laid upon him. One of his main functions is presiding over the hearings of a defence committee called PointCorp. Congressman Collins is openly against PointCorp and its practices and he never tries to hide it. He accuses Point Corp executives of enriching themselves at the expense of U.S. soldiers, who are risking their lives in Iraq.

For the character of Stephen Collins, the political and personal go hand in hand. He is supposed to be an exemplary and trained politician. When he confesses his affair with his secretary Sonia Baker, he pushes his private life into the limelight. He is heavily criticized and his credibility plummets. His tarnished reputation is because of his mistakes in his marriage. There is this close equilisation between his reputation as a politician with his image of husband. If the latter crumbles, so does his political persona. Not only has he committed adultery, but it also seems as if his unfaithfulness had extended to his moral and ethical principles.

On keeping with this, Witmer explains that the cinematographer of the film, Rodrigo Prieto, used a range of cool colours and shot the film in HD in order to portray the character of Stephen Collins (he chose a different texture and range of colours for the character of Cal to show their antagonistic personalities) (2009: 46). As a result, Stephen is shown as a glossy character and his facial expressions are enhanced. Having a defined image of him allows the viewer to see that he is fully committed to keep, what psychologists Rind and Benjamin call (2001: 19) "impression management". It can be

defined as “any behaviour by a person that has the purpose of controlling or manipulating the attribution and impressions formed by the others”. He is very concerned about other people’s opinions. As he largely depends on the television cameras, every time he is on air, he frivolously thinks of his behaviour and facial impressions so as to ensure the image he gives of himself corresponds with the one that the public holds of him. Since he has been disloyal, he knows very well that has to project the image of a truly repentant person.

Congressman Collin’s connection with mediatisation leads to another less visible but pervasive issue in the film: militarization. Halfway through the film, spectators find out that before going into politics, Collins was a soldier who served in the U.S. army in the Gulf War. In this fight between private and public, a new dimension is added: the present and the past. In this current state of affairs, the past always comes back to haunt, in this case, Congressman Collins.

The past metaphorically plays an important role on the present-day politician Collins. The U.S. government spends money on U.S. military forces in order to train soldiers for war. When finishing their duties on the battlefield, those combatants return to their normal lives and find themselves alone with no governmental support. Readjusting to civilian lifestyle is never easy. In a matter of hours, they have to change from a dangerous, chaotic and almost barbaric soldier life to a safe, ordered, and civilized citizen life. Coming home after being on the battlefield is even more challenging than war. In her analysis of the post-war experiences of Iraq veterans, Cecilia Capuzzi finds out that most of them suffered from deep depressions, conduct disorder, or were given to domestic violence as a consequence of their trauma. Those who did not undergo any trauma were subject to experience “Post Combat Freakout” (2007: 49). In other words, they cannot cope with civilian life as wartime habits have been inevitably transferred once back home.

The case of Congressman Collins bears some parallelisms with the latter. He was one of those veteran soldiers who came back from the battlefields after the Kuwait War and were apparently successful in getting in touch again with their previous civilized lifestyles. He does not seem to suffer from trauma. However, Collins is a clear example of those soldiers that, once returned from war, are no longer the same people. They are rather different people with a different mentality and a different view of things. This can be seen in the scene of the second hearing where his political facet reveals that in spite of being a politician, he still has this ‘violent and hostile behaviour’, which is very commonly found in the war zone. He publicly reprimands one of the PointCorp executives for using military personnel and for being only interested in the money they obtain for war issues in the Middle East. He accuses them of that because he has been secretly investigating PointCorp and other private defense corporations such as Medal of Freedom Initiative, Tech Force Security and Alpha Bravo Security. According to his research, they are collaborating in order to create one monopoly that would control homeland security.

Collins is the first person to find out the operations of these private contractors. Yet, instead of denouncing their unlawful practices to the Supreme Court, he aggressively attacks them in one of those hearings. He wants to go against all those corporations and defeat them as if he was on the battlefield. As he became a war hero, he now aspires to be a national hero. We can see in figure 9 that his fellow soldiers are also a relevant element in the film. One of them, Water Schroyer, is interviewed by one newspaper. This former soldier praises Collins and claims that he is an exceptional and an honest politician. As he puts it, what the media is saying about Collins is nothing but “platitudes, paddling and stuff”. He denies all criticism towards him and raises him to the category of war hero, since in the heading of his interview says: “Stephen’s the kind of guy you’d want in a foxhole with you”.

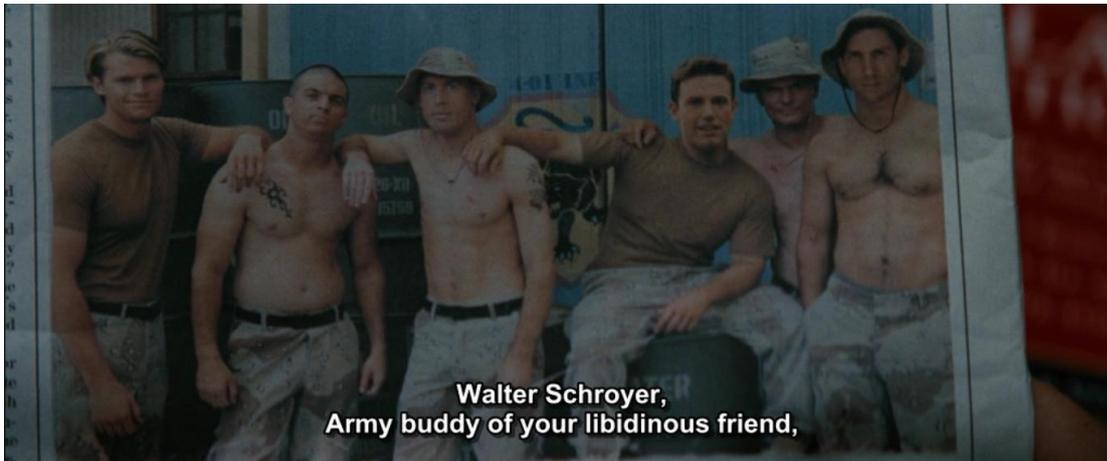


Figure 9

Near the end of the film, we learn that Robert Bingham (Michael Berresse), another fellow soldier of Collins, is revealed to be the alleged murderer of the small-time crook, Sonia Baker and the passing pizza-boy. As he is yet another soldier who was on the battlefield, he also presents a “war attitude” at home. Unlike Collins, he is a solitary man, who has not adjusted to civilian life. His violent acts show he is determined to accomplish a “mission” and he is not going to deviate from it no matter what. As can be seen in the garage scene when he is ready to shoot Cal, he does not trust anyone and he is on constant alert for danger. His experience on the battlefield stripped him of his emotions and feelings.

In the final section of the film, Cal discovers that, even if in an indirect way, it is Collins that is behind the murders. Collins admits that he had discovered that Sonia, his secretary and his lover, was an insider of PointCorp. Since Bingham owed Collins a favour for having saved his life in Kuwait, he asked Bingham to watch her. Once again, war rules seem to apply. Bingham does not ask any questions, just obeys. Despite the fact that Collins tries to prove his innocence by claiming that in no way had he known that Bingham was going to kill her, he cannot be exonerated. It is also clear to both Cal and the audience that there is a contradiction in terms between Stephen’s public opposition to PointCorp and his private actions regarding this issue. Collins is criticizing that PointCorp and other private contractors are taking advantage of war

issues in an attempt to privatize surveillance and homeland security but at the same time, he has hired a friend ex-soldier to watch Sonia and follow her steps. His practice of watching over her is not that different from surveillance practices.

Collins's paradoxical *modus operandi* could be understood in two ways. On the one hand, he may have not been aware that he was encroaching Sonia Baker's liberty. This reading would imply that he still preserves a war-like attitude similar to that of his fellow soldier Bingham. Hiring a person to follow and watch Sonia may seem to him insignificant when compared to some of the things he saw and did on the battlefield. On the other hand, from his position as a Congressman, he may even think that he stands above the law. There is an abuse of power on his part, which makes him a corrupt politician. He, who at first seemed to be a promising and different politician, has been contaminated by the greediness of power. He just takes the law into his own hands. He wants to persecute private defence contractors because they pose a threat to society but now it is him that has also become a threat to society and the U.S. moral and ethics. He seems to be an embodiment of the king of the law of the jungle.

The film is critical towards this "war-like behavior". As it is argued, soldiers are likely to develop a "battle-mind" style in combat. That may lead to feelings of alienation when returning to civilian life unless they are able to leave it aside (Capuzzi 2007: 49). Robert Bingham and Congressman Collins's actions cannot be justified since they are no longer in war. This would fit on the battlefield, in a place where there is no ethics or morality, but in this current state of affairs, once back home, these attitudes and behaviours are said to be out of position, beyond ethics and morality.

This idea can be related to Giorgio Agamben's notion of the "State of Exception". Agamben (2005: 23) defines it as "a public emergency that 'threatens the life of the nation' and something prior to or other than law". According to him, this notion has always been there, from the Roman Empire to medieval times but he traces

back the modern state of exception to the French Revolution (37). It was implemented for a limited time during some occasional social upheaval. Nowadays, as a result of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror, he argues in an interview that we are seriously living under this paradigm in this day and age (Raulff 2004: 609). Living a daily life with something that used to be unprecedented in the past makes the very notion lose its status of exception and become something ordinary.

It is precisely by means of this critical stance towards Congressman Collins and Bingham's "war-like" attitudes that the film is stating that no state of exception, especially the current one is beneficial. PointCorp's owners and Congressman Collins, who hold too much power, are taking advantage of the fact that this War on Terror has caused some derogations from law. They have arguably taking the law into their hands in order to settle accounts with those who are posing a threat to their own safeties and interests, both at home and abroad. They erroneously think that the means does justify the end. Yet, the film advocates for "a rule of law". Society should be ruled by laws and not by people's interests. Laws are vitally important for ensuring citizens' rights and liberties and pursuing democracy.

#### **4. – Conclusion**

In this essay, I have analysed formally and thematically the film *State of Play* as an example of a political film in the context of post 9/11 United States. I started by exploring the film's emphasis on surveillance, which is primarily presented by means of establishing shots. They introduce the setting of Washington and its two sides: the political and the non-political one. The pervasive presence of the helicopter as a prop is associated with the third type of Panopticon. According to this concept, this means of

transport could be interpreted as a metaphor that enables the observer to watch over the observed without being aware of this. The helicopters are one of the formal strategies the film uses to construct this atmosphere of constant surveillance.

The constant presence of helicopters hovering in the sky is just one of the ways in which the film creates a “watchful look”. This is achieved in multiple ways. Point of view shots, long takes and shots showing random and ordinary people looking off-screen are some of the formal mechanisms the film uses in order to depict the general atmosphere of surveillance.

The use of television screen shots contributes to “this watchful look” as well. Unlike the previous formal features, this one brings about the issue of mediatisation which in turn is very much connected with Congressman Collins. As a public figure, he is fully aware of the power and influence of the media but shows an ambivalent attitude towards it. On the one hand, he tries to dodge the media when his affair with his secretary is made public but on the other hand, he needs it in order to clear his reputation and project an image of him as a trustworthy politician. Congressman Collins is said to be an expert on “impression management”, that is, the ability to manipulate somebody else’s perception of oneself.

Congressman Collins’s connection with mediatisation gives rise to another less visible but relevant issue that pervades the whole film: militarization. He is a war veteran whose state of mind changed radically as a result of his experiences on the battlefield. This phenomenon can also be seen in one of his fellow soldiers. Both are back home but they are not the same kind of people they used to be. It seems that the war has had a tremendous effect on them. It is in the last scenes of the film that Congressman Collins’s contradictory agenda is revealed. He cynically criticises PointCorp’s contractors and their plan to control Homeland security by privatizing surveillance but at the same time he is doing the same since he hires a fellow ex-soldier

to watch Sonia Baker. Surprisingly enough, he does not see any relationship between what he is doing and what PointCorp does. For him, following Sonia is not a criminal practice but something necessary.

The film may conclude that the atmosphere of surveillance poses a threat to the security of all U.S. citizens and subsequently, the whole world since they are abusing the notion of “state of exception” and using it for their own benefit under the excuse of the War on Terror. All those elements are used by the film in order to bring to the fore the fact that they are mistaking the concept of “state of law” with “rule of law” and that may turn out to be very dangerous in today’s state of affairs.

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