Fabricating the Absolute Fake - revised edition

Kooijman, Jaap

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3. The Desert of the Real

America as Hyperreality

On November 22, 1990, during the first Gulf War, President George H.W. Bush gave a pep talk to the American soldiers stationed near Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. “Now, look, look, we know that the days can get pretty long out here, and you’ll be glad to know that if it goes on too long we have a secret weapon in reserve,” Bush joked. “If push comes to shove, we’re going to get Roseanne Barr to go to Iraq and sing the national anthem. Baghdad Betty, eat your heart out.” Bush was referring to the controversial performance of the American national anthem by comedian and television sitcom star Roseanne Barr. On July 25, 1990, in between two games of the San Diego Padres baseball team, she had sung an extremely off-key a cappella rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Adding insult to injury, she also grabbed her crotch and spat on the ground. Many viewers were not amused. Roseanne Barr was booed by the audience, strongly criticized by the press, and denounced by Bush, who called her performance “disgraceful.” President Bush’s true secret weapon, however, proved to be not Roseanne Barr, but African-American pop diva Whitney Houston, whose rousing rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner” at the 1991 Super Bowl became a symbol of American unity and patriotism. Broadcast live on television by ABC on January 27, 1991, only ten days after the official beginning of Operation Desert Storm, Houston’s performance turned the Super Bowl into a pep rally to cheer on the American army in its war against Iraq.

Both President Bush’s reference to Roseanne Barr and the Super Bowl performance by Whitney Houston show how American pop culture has become intertwined with American politics. In this chapter, I will look at explicit moments of such intertwining. First, I will discuss the Super Bowl performances of the American national anthem by Whitney Houston in 1991 during the first Gulf War, by Mariah Carey in 2002 during the American invasion of Afghanistan after 9/11, by the Dixie Chicks in 2003 during the pending
American invasion of Iraq, and by Beyoncé Knowles in 2004, nine months after President George W. Bush had announced the invasion of Iraq to be a “Mission Accomplished.” Second, I will look at the role of American pop culture in two of the few Hollywood films that deal with the first Gulf War: Three Kings (David O. Russell, 1999) and Jarhead (Sam Mendes, 2005), the latter based on the bestselling memoirs by first Gulf War veteran Anthony Swofford. Before analyzing these pop-cultural artifacts, I will introduce the concept of myth, as defined by Roland Barthes, and the concept of hyperreality, as defined by Jean Baudrillard, both of which are helpful in understanding how American pop culture not only enables the popular translation of American military actions, but simultaneously invites a justification of the American political position, even if some of these expressions (like Three Kings) may appear to be critical of the nation-state USA. Although the televised Super Bowl performances and the Hollywood movies Three Kings and Jarhead belong to different genres, they all effectively combine American politics and pop culture by applying the connotations of an imagined America to explain and often justify the politics of the American nation-state. Moreover, as these television and film performances by American pop and movie stars are globally mediated, they not only present a national self-image to American viewers, but an ideological image of America to an international audience as well.

Barthesian Myth and Baudrillardian Hyperreality

In his essay “Myth Today” (originally published in 1957), Roland Barthes uses a 1955 Paris Match cover depicting a young black soldier as an example of how myth is constructed. To analyze its construction, Barthes recognizes two levels of signification: denotation and connotation. On the level of denotation, the primary level of signification, the cover shows a young black soldier saluting the French flag, the latter not present but implied through the cover’s use of the national tricolor red, white, and blue. On the level of connotation, the secondary level of signification, the magazine cover offers a positive image of French imperialism and patriotism. Placed within the historical context of the then recent defeat in Vietnam and the raging war in Algeria, the depiction of a black soldier implies that French imperialism is justified and widely supported, including by the non-white population of the French empire. More important, the myth that French imperialism is positive is presented as self-evident and uncontested. As Barthes explains: “Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity
which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.” In other words, through connotation the meaning of representation is reduced to seemingly self-evident and uncontested myth, inviting an uncritical reading.

The 1955 *Paris Match* cover used by Barthes immediately comes to mind when looking at two 2003 magazine covers featuring the same picture of Jessica Lynch, the American soldier who was heroically rescued by the American Special Forces after being captured by the Iraqi army. Both *Newsweek* (14 April 2003) and *People* magazine (21 April 2003) use an undated army picture of Lynch in uniform in front of the American flag, an image which has become iconic by now, showing her face in close-up, smiling directly into the camera. There are great similarities between these two covers and the *Paris Match* cover. In both cases, the national flag is present in the left corner. The French flag is implied through the use of its colors, while the American flag is explicitly present. Moreover, the gender of the American soldier works similarly to the racial identity of the French soldier. As the blackness of the French soldier implied wide solidarity for French imperialism, the smiling face of the female soldier suggests broad support for the American war effort. Yet, there are also important differences. The French soldier remained anonymous, while the American soldier has a name: Jessica Lynch, an innocent young woman who ends up being a soldier on duty in Iraq. More than just a name, Jessica Lynch has become an adventurous tale. As the headline of the *People* magazine cover reads: “POW Jessica Lynch – Her Incredible Story: An inside account of the young soldier’s midnight rescue, her joyful family reunion, and the long road home.” The cover of *Newsweek* uses fewer words to achieve a similar result by presenting the headline “Saving Private Lynch,” an obvious reference to the Hollywood blockbuster *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998). Thus, in stark contrast to the anonymous soldier on the 1955 cover of *Paris Match*, the American soldier on the 2003 covers of *Newsweek* and *People* magazine is not only personalized but also transformed into a highly dramatized “true” story, a dramatization which has been taken a step further by the NBC television movie *Saving Jessica Lynch* (Peter Markle, 2003). Through her passive heroism by being both a brave soldier and an innocent victim, Jessica Lynch not only becomes the “face” of the second Gulf War, she also embodies an uncontested positive justification of the American military presence in Iraq.

In his essay “Culture, US Imperialism, and Globalization,” John Carlos Rowe compares the “story” of Jessica Lynch – as constructed by the American media, both the factual news and the fictional television film – to the Hollywood film *Wag the Dog* (Barry Levinson, 1997), in which a Hollywood producer helps to cover up a presidential sex scandal by inventing a war with Albania, a fabricated story which includes the saving of an American
soldier who is left behind enemy lines. As Rowe argues, *Wag the Dog* “sati-
rizes Americans’ chronic ignorance of world events, thanks to news struc-
tured around entertainment and commercialism, but it also reinforces the
assumption that the US is the center of the world and that even a ‘fictional’
war can have meaning and value, as long as it is waged by the US.”
The media coverage of the second Gulf War, and the saving of Private Jessica Lynch
in particular, reconfirms the fiction of *Wag the Dog*, especially after the Brit-
ish BBC documentary *War Spin* (originally broadcast on May 18, 2003) re-
vealed that the spectacular rescue of Lynch, which was filmed, appeared to
have been scripted by the Pentagon. However, whether or not the saving of
Jessica Lynch was “real” is beside the point. When Roland Barthes speaks of
myth, he does not imply that myth is by definition untrue or unreal. Myth
works because its connotations remain uncontested and uncritically ac-
cepted. The smiling face of Jessica Lynch in the media continues to provide
an innocent justification of the American invasion of Iraq, in spite of the
critical reading that the fictional *Wag the Dog* scenario may invite. As Rowe
suggests: “Rather than *Wag the Dog*’s satire overwhelming and thus neutral-
izing the Jessica Lynch story on the evening news, Jessica Lynch’s narrative,
now made into a television biopic, has undone the irony of Barry Levinson’s
film, especially its ‘rescued soldier’ device.” Even if the Jessica Lynch story
is recognized as a real-life enactment of the *Wag the Dog* scenario, that does
not undermine the effectiveness of the mechanism which the film satirizes.

Neal Gabler also refers to *Wag the Dog* when discussing the way in which
the administration of President George H.W. Bush staged the first Gulf War as a
“multibillion-dollar movie blockbuster,” broadcast by the television networks,
featuring heroic soldiers, dark mustachioed villains, and spectacular visual ef-
effects of “smart bombing,” with a triumphant parade of the homecoming troops
in the streets of New York as grand finale. Aply titled *Life: The Movie*, Gabler’s
study builds on Daniel Boorstin’s *The Image* (1961), in which Boorstin argues
that the fantasy of advertising, Hollywood, and television has replaced reality
in American culture, becoming more “real” than reality itself. *Life: The Movie*
also shares the rather cultural pessimism of Neal Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves
to Death* (1985), suggesting that, particularly because of commercial televi-
sion, American culture has been reduced to entertainment. Moreover, *Life: The
Movie* can be read as a popular adaptation of Jean Baudrillard’s concept of
hyperreality, suggesting that reality merely exists as a simulacrum, constructed
through its simulation: “The real is hyperrealized. Neither realized, nor ideal-
ized: but hyperrealized. The hyperreal is the abolition of the real not by violent
destruction, but by its assumption.” Baudrillard’s hyperreality is not the op-
posite of reality (“unreal”) but a continuous simulation that creates the real
as just another sign in a chain of signs which endlessly refer to each other. If indeed American life is a movie rather than being like a movie, American life can be perceived as a hyperreality, in which the actual reality of life has become part of the stream of images mediated by Hollywood and television, as Jean Baudrillard convincingly shows in *America*, his fascinating account of his travels through the USA. “In America cinema is true because it is the whole of space, the whole way of life that are cinematic,” he writes. “The break between the two … does not exist: life is cinema.”

The significance of Baudrillard’s *America* lies not so much in the claim that America is the ultimate simulacrum, which can be contested. Concluding whether or not America is in fact a hyperreality is less relevant than trying to understand the way American culture works by perceiving America as a hyperreality. From a Baudrillardian perspective, America is a space where the myth of the American Dream does not come true but is true already through its mythic construction. In a paradoxical way, America is a “utopia achieved,” the impossible made possible, because of its fictional character. As Baudrillard explains:

> When I speak of the American “way of life,” I do so to emphasize its utopian nature, its *mythic* banality, its dream quality, and its grandeur. That philosophy which is immanent not only … in the reality of everyday life, but in the hyperreality of that life which, as it is, displays all the characteristics of fiction. It is this fictional character which is so exciting. Now, fiction is not imagination. It is what anticipates imagination by giving it the form of reality. … The American way of life is spontaneously fictional, since it is a transcending of the imaginary in reality.11

Here Baudrillard’s hyperreality and myth overlap, as the fiction that shapes American reality is constituted by myth in the Barthesian sense. In this manner, the American Dream turns out to be an uncontested hyperreality rather than an idealized or imagined desire. American pop culture is instrumental in the shaping of hyperreality through fictionalization, as movie and pop stars are the mythical embodiment of the American Dream, its living examples.

In *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, composed of three essays originally published before, during, and immediately after Operation Desert Storm in the British *Guardian* and the French *Libération*, Baudrillard proposes that, similar to his reading of America, the first Gulf War should be perceived as a hyperreality, a simulacrum which transforms the actual war into a virtual one, a spectacle of information. This simulation of the Gulf War, broadcast live on television, is made out of symptoms, images of reality which can no longer be
recognized as either true or false, real or fake. “We must learn to read symp-
toms as symptoms, and television as the hysterical symptom of a war which
has nothing to do with its critical mass.” Baudrillard’s claim that the actual
Gulf War had not taken place provoked strong objections, most explicitly by
Christopher Norris who accused Baudrillard of being nihilistically uncritical,
as by reducing the war to a hyperreal event, Baudrillard escapes the ethical
responsibility of speaking out against the physical reality of the Gulf War. However, Baudrillard never suggests that the Gulf War is not real in the sense
of denying its materiality of real Iraqi civilians and soldiers being killed by real
bombs. Quite the contrary, he strongly criticizes that the “100,000 Iraqi dead”
are being misused to recognize the Gulf War as a real war: “What is worse is
that these dead still serve as an alibi for those who do not want to have been
excited for nothing, nor to have been had for nothing: at least the dead would
prove that this war was indeed a war and not a shameful and pointless hoax,
a programmed and melodramatic version of what was the drama of war.”
Rather than being nihilistically uncritical, Jean Baudrillard’s *The Gulf War Did
Not Take Place* forces us to recognize that the symptomatic images of compu-
terized warfare and smart bombing as broadcast by television are not merely
representations that can be judged to be either real or fake, but images that
construct the Gulf War as a hyperreality, thereby not denying the physical real-
ity of the Iraqi victims but rendering them invisible.

Although critical of Baudrillard’s claim, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam
have described the Gulf War as a multigeneric television miniseries, drawing
“on the codes of the war film (soldiers silhouetted against the sky, thrilling
martial music, *Top Gun* visuals); of the PBS educational show (military ped-
agogics with pointers, maps, and video blackboards); of sports programming
(instant replay, expert-running commentary); and of the western (lines were
drawn in the sand, the implacable logic of the showdown).” Not only the im-
ages of computer warfare and smart bombing themselves but also the way they
were broadcast shape the fictionalization of the Gulf War into hyperreality,
based on the conventions of pop culture. As I will show in the remainder of this
chapter, the fictionalization was not limited to the news coverage by television
news programs, but also occurred through the ritualistic annual performances
of the national anthem at the Super Bowl, and in fact still continues today
through Hollywood films such as *Three Kings* and *Jarhead*. My analysis of these
pop-cultural performances by pop and movie stars will suggest that the Gulf
War that did not take place presents and reconfirms America as an uncontested
mythical hyperreality.
Whitney Houston was not the first internationally famous pop star to sing “The Star-Spangled Banner” at the Super Bowl. Since the early 1980s, it has become a Super Bowl tradition to invite pop music stars to sing the national anthem, including performances by Diana Ross (1982), Billy Joel (1989 and 2007), Cher (1999), Faith Hill (2000), Christina Aguilera (2011), and Alicia Keys (2013). Unlike some of the performances by pop stars at other occasions, none of the Super Bowl performances have been considered controversial. In addition to the earlier-mentioned rendition by Roseanne Barr, controversial performances of “The Star-Spangled Banner” range from José Feliciano’s slow and melancholic rendition at the 1968 World Series and Jimi Hendrix’s guitar solo at the 1969 Woodstock festival, to the soulful renditions by Aretha Franklin at the 1968 Democratic National Convention and Marvin Gaye at the 1983 National Basketball Association All-Star Game. In 2001, at the start of the Indianapolis 500 racing event, Steven Tyler of the rock band Aerosmith caused controversy by changing the words “the home of the brave” into “the home of the Indianapolis 500.” Such controversies have been absent from the annual Super Bowl performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” which emphasizes its status as the performance of the national anthem. Each year the performance is tightly scripted and monitored, the vocals often pre-recorded, to ensure that no unwelcome surprises interfere with its almost ritualistic status, different from what can happen during the extravagant halftime performances that are more susceptible to controversy, of which the 2004 performance by Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake (as discussed later on in this chapter) is the most obvious example.

Several scholars have pointed out the significance of sports events, and the Super Bowl in particular, in the construction of a national identity. Being the “crucible of [the] nation,” to quote Toby Miller, sports are often used as a metaphor for the nation. Not only is nationhood essential to international sports events such as the World Cup Soccer and the Olympics, and also American national events such as the Super Bowl and the World Series, the rhetoric of sports and the military are intertwined and often interchangeable. Football coaches use military metaphors to plan the strategies that will lead their uniformed athletes to victory, while army officials, politicians, and journalists talk about military operations – led by generals coaching their uniformed soldiers – by referring to sports. Similar to the way a national identity can be reinforced through the patriotic sentiments of war, sports events can bring national communities together in patriotism and nationalism. Perhaps this “natural” connection between the military and sports explains the relatively easy way,
without any resistance or commentary, in which the Super Bowl performances bring together sports and explicit expressions of military power.

Whitney Houston herself recognized the patriotic character of her performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” In an interview, she recalled:

If you were there, you could feel the intensity. You know, we were in the Gulf War at the time. It was an intense time for a country. A lot of our daughters and sons were overseas fighting. I could see, in the stadium, I could see the fear, the hope, the intensity, the prayers going up, you know, and I just felt like this is the moment. And it was hope, we needed hope, you know, to bring our babies home and that’s what it was about for me, that’s what I felt when I sang that song, and the overwhelming love coming out of the stands was incredible.19

As the use of the plural personal pronouns “we” and “our” implies, Houston speaks of her performance as a collective experience. Not the American nation-state as an abstract entity but “we” as a “country” are at war. Moreover, she uses the metaphor of the family to express the collective national identity. In spite of the strong presence of the military, Whitney Houston recognizes the expression of explicit patriotism as “overwhelming love,” fitting within the perspective of the Barthesian myth, which, in this case, means that the American participation in the first Gulf War remains unquestioned.

Bombastic may be the best word to describe Houston’s performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Rather than being dressed as the glamorous diva, Whitney Houston wears a white tracksuit, with a red and blue print, an athletic uniform that refers to the national tricolor red, white, and blue. The connection to patriotism and the Gulf War is made explicit by the announcer, as he asks the audience to join in the honoring of “America” and “especially the brave men and women serving our nation in the Persian Gulf and throughout the world.” The emphasis on the military is reinforced by the presence of military personnel on the field, while the athletes are notably absent. The military personnel, dressed in various uniforms to signify the solidarity among different army units, display the flags of the different American states, which emphasizes that the USA consists of states all unified in a national war effort. Two male members of the military are singled out through the use of close-ups: an African-American officer and a white officer. The second close-up of the African-American officer uncannily resembles the saluting young black soldier on the cover of the Paris Match magazine, as analyzed by Roland Barthes. Similar to his example, the explicit inclusion of African-American military (in addition to Houston’s blackness) implies that there is wide support for the war
effort among the American population, however ethnically diverse the population may be. This is reinforced by the way in which the close-up of Whitney Houston dissolves into the close-up of the white officer, and back again. For a second, both Houston and the white officer are captured within the same frame (almost like a split screen), a conventional way to emphasize their similarity over their differences. In other words, through the suggestion that Houston and the white officer are one, their shared identity as Americans is brought forward.

The American flag is omnipresent in all shots, either explicitly in the form of an actual American flag, or implicitly through the use of its colors red, white, and blue. In addition to the waving American flags, a group of people at the center of the football field display a gigantic American flag, best visible when shot from a distance. On several occasions, the presence of the flag is emphasized through the use of close-ups in connection to the words Whitney Houston sings. When she sings, “… see, by the dawn’s early light,” a close-up of an American flag dissolves in and out of the close-up of Houston. Houston does not leave the frame, but for a second the image of the American flag is transparently placed over her image. At the point when Whitney Houston sings “through the night that our flag was still there,” the camera cuts to a close-up of the American flag proudly waving at the top of the stadium – a television convention found in many broadcasts of the Super Bowl national anthem performances.

Perhaps most important is the way in which the audience is presented as a collective of American patriots who wholeheartedly support their nation’s war effort. Throughout the performance, there are medium shots and close-ups of the audience waving small American flags. While at international sports events the audience is divided between two or more competing nations, the audience at the Super Bowl supports just one: the American nation. No signs are shown in the support of one of the two teams competing. In fact, any mention of either team is absent (in 1991, the New York Giants beat the Buffalo Bills). Instead, rather than cheering on the individual teams, the red-white-and-blue signs in the audience support the American war effort. “America’s Bravest Citizens: Support Our G.I.’s” reads one, followed by two other red-white-and-blue signs reading “God Bless America” and “Go USA.” Particularly the latter sign, “Go USA,” emphasizes the intertwining of sports and the military. The American war effort is supported in the same way as an audience cheers on a sports team. In this way, the Super Bowl becomes a pep rally to cheer on the American military in the Gulf. Moreover, this military connection is made complete with four F-16 fighting jets from the 56th Tactical Training Wing at MacDill Air Force Base flying over as the performance’s grand finale.
The intertwinement of sports, patriotism, and pop culture, all supporting the war effort, ties American nationalism to consumerism. Jean Baudrillard has suggested that the USA is “a society that is endlessly concerned to vindicate itself, perpetually seeking to justify its own existence,” adding that the “American flag bears witness to this by its omnipresence, … not as a heroic sign, but as a trademark of a good brand.”

The American flag is not only a symbol of the American nation-state and its people, but an advertising logo as well, a sign that refers both to the nation-state and to an endless chain of signs of American pop culture. Although already functioning in this manner during the first Gulf War, this has become even clearer after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. As Susan Willis shows, after 9/11 the American flag is omnipresent, displayed at places ranging from Ground Zero to homes, cars, storefronts, and government buildings, and eventually also at Kandahar Airport in Afghanistan. Moreover, the flag functions as a patriotic fashion statement:

Emblazoned across our chests, the flag becomes one with the rock bands and sports teams that also claim our allegiance and warrant a T-shirt’s stamp of approval. … With flags on our shirts, we express the heartfelt desire to contribute our individual pledge to the collective endeavor, even while we simultaneously recognize that the American endeavor is to consume commodities and ensure their worldwide distribution.

Rather than seeing the flag’s double function as a contradiction, Susan Willis suggests that American patriotism and consumerism reinforce each other. In her introduction to The Selling of 9/11, Dana Heller makes a similar argument by perceiving the flag as a “national-corporate logo,” one which does not invite a questioning of the American nation-state and its international politics, concluding that “the flag erupts upon the national scene like a neurotic symptom, a repetition of our hysterical deafness to any criticism or any idea that might get in the way of our rights to unlimited consumption, and our national duty to employ military measures, if necessary, to protect that right.” The performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner” at the Super Bowl functions in the same way, as the American flag and the national anthem have become intertwined as both a conventional reference to the nation-state USA and a free-floating sign, an advertising logo of American consumer culture. Performed by Whitney Houston, “The Star-Spangled Banner” is both a national anthem and a pop song, bringing patriotism and consumerism together.

After the Super Bowl performance, Whitney Houston’s “The Star-Spangled Banner” was released as a single, reaching number 20 on Billboard’s Hot 100. The single was also released in other countries, including the Neth-
erlands, but failed to make the pop charts outside of the USA. Copies of the single (in addition to complementary copies of *Playboy* magazine) were sent to the American troops stationed in Kuwait. Dressed in blue military overalls, Houston gave another performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner” on March 31, 2001, on her *Welcome Home Heroes with Whitney Houston* HBO television special, recorded before an audience of homecoming soldiers and family members. In 2001, one month after 9/11, Houston’s record company Arista re-released “The Star-Spangled Banner” as a single, with “America the Beautiful” as an additional song, this time reaching number 6 on Billboard’s Hot 100. The cover art of the 2001 single is particularly significant. While the 1991 single features a picture of Houston performing at the Super Bowl, the re-release merely shows a pop art styled picture of the American flag, functioning as a conventional patriotic symbol signifying the nation-state USA, but also as a trademarked brand of pop-cultural America and as an advertising logo to sell Houston’s single, perfectly revealing how patriotism, pop culture, and consumerism have become intertwined.

**America at the Super Bowl after 9/11**

Writing about the 2003 Super Bowl performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner” by the Dixie Chicks, Tobias Peterson has argued that it was a reenactment of the 1991 Super Bowl, as each was “a massive wartime pep rally, cheering not only the players on the field, but the soldiers in the Gulf and elsewhere.” He also compares the Dixie Chicks’ performance to the 2002 performance by Mariah Carey, claiming that the 2003 one was “far removed from last year’s pervading sense of victimization” and that “war and revenge are now more the focus of national discussion than grief and remembrance.” Yet, when taking a closer look at all performances, the similarities become striking. Not only the 2003 performance by the Dixie Chicks, but also the 2002 performance by Mariah Carey and the 2004 performance by Beyoncé Knowles prove to be very similar to Whitney Houston’s 1991 performance. These four Super Bowl performances can be seen as American national rituals, which, as Rob Kroes suggests, “increasingly blended mass spectator sports with displays of military prowess and martial vigor that paralleled the gestation of the new [neo-conservative] foreign policy views,” constituting a “trend [that] may herald a militarization of the American public spirit, propagated through the mass media.” Since the pivotal performance by Whitney Houston, most of the Super Bowl performances of “The Star-Spangled Banner” have included an explicit presence of the military.

**The Desert of the Real**
At a press conference before her 2002 Super Bowl performance, Mariah Carey explained that she, similar to Whitney Houston, recognized the patriotic symbolism of the ceremony. “Definitely after the events of September 11, I think that people obviously have been much more focused on the patriotic nature of this event and what it’s going to mean.” Only a couple of months after 9/11, the Super Bowl performance was intended to remember the tragedy and pay respect to the 9/11 victims. However, the performance was also part of a larger spectacle that was more than merely an act of remembrance. As Douglas Kellner has analyzed in his study *Media Spectacle*, the 2002 Super Bowl could be seen as a continuation of the display of military power and patriotism as originally presented at the 1991 Super Bowl:

Super Bowl 2002 featured Bush I and former US Navy and NFL star Roger Stauback flipping the coin to decide which team would receive the first kickoff. A hi-tech spectacle featured US troops watching live in Kandahar, and military personnel punching in statistical graphics, making the screen appear like a computer in a military system. Stars of each team were periodically shown in front of a waving US flag with a graphic announcing that “they were proud to be a part of SB36, of this great nation, and that they were thankful for the troops’ courage in Afghanistan.” Broadcast by the ultra-right Fox network, the computer graphics featured red, white, and blue banners and the transition graphics involved the use of an exploding fireworks scene with the triad of patriotic colors blasting across the screen. The Super Bowl logo in the center of the field was in the shape of the United States, and the Fox network used a patriotic logo with the flag’s colors and images, imitating NBC, which had transformed its multicolored peacock into the flag’s tricolors after the September 11 terrorist attacks.

I quote from Kellner’s analysis at length, as it shows how the broadcast of the 2002 Super Bowl, similar to the 1991 Super Bowl, has effectively included the display of military power within a sports event. Rather than merely remembering the 9/11 victims, the 2002 Super Bowl proves to be another example of how the collectivity of the sports event is used to bring together the nation in wartime patriotism and to cheer on the army in its war effort.

Compared to Whitney Houston’s performance, the performance by Mariah Carey seems much less bombastic. The stadium is shot in relative darkness, emphasizing a mood of mourning and seriousness. While the audience was clearly visible during the broadcast of Houston’s performance, here the audience is visually almost absent. Only in one shot, as the camera
is placed among the audience in the stands, is the audience shown, though individuals are not recognizable. Without medium shots or close-ups of the audience, the audience is reduced to a cheering mass, for the most part hidden in darkness. Similar to Whitney Houston’s performance, no athletes are shown and the competing teams (in 2002, the New England Patriots beat the St. Louis Rams) are not mentioned. Instead, the segment starts with a medium pan shot of five uniformed officers of the U.S.S. Cole, the U.S. Marine Corps, the New York New Jersey Port Authority, and the New York City Police and Fire Department. The link to international terrorism is immediately made explicit, as not only the victims of 9/11, but also the military victims of the terrorist attack on the U.S.S. Cole in the Yemen harbor are remembered. This not only shifts the tribute from the national into the international sphere, but also makes an explicit connection between the military and the civilian uniformed personnel. By honoring the victims among uniformed personnel, without explicitly including the civilian victims, the performance reduces 9/11 to a military event of international politics, ignoring its also being a national civilian tragedy. Moreover, it is this shift from the national to the international, from the civilian to the militaristic, that makes the Mariah Carey performance similar to the Whitney Houston performance. Even though the audience in Houston’s performance is shown to be more active in the actual support of the war effort (compared to the relatively visual absence of Carey’s audience), both performances can be perceived as an explicit support of military action, respectively in the Gulf and Afghanistan.

Similar to most Super Bowl broadcasts of the national anthem, the American flag is omnipresent in the performance by Mariah Carey, again both explicitly through the display of the actual American flag, as well as implicitly through the use of the national tricolor red, white, and blue. For example, in the first close-up of Carey, these three colors are dominant, in the combination of Carey’s blue dress, the conductor Keith Lockhart’s white shirt, and the red music standard (the only other color is black), which is repeated in the banner containing the Super Bowl logo, the Fox logo, and Carey’s name. A group of children dressed in white display a gigantic American flag in the geographical shape of the United States of America. When Carey sings, “… that our flag was still there,” the camera zooms into a close-up of the American flag held by one of the five uniformed officers. Perhaps most significant, two American flags are prominently featured in two tableaux vivants: the first being a live enactment of the Iwo Jima monument, with five soldiers in battle fatigues planting the American flag in the soil, and the second being six uniformed officers of the New York City Police and Fire Department displaying – in Iwo Jima style – the torn “original” American flag of the World Trade Center. In both shots, the camera zooms into a close-up of the American flag.
The Super Bowl performance is not the first time that the imagery of the Iwo Jima monument, which in its turn is based on the famous 1945 photograph by Joe Rosenthal, has been used in connection with 9/11. Immediately after the attacks on September 11, photographer Thomas Franklin shot an Iwo Jima-style picture of three white firemen raising the American flag on Ground Zero. Franklin’s picture instantly became an icon of 9/11, reproduced in many ways, including as official stamp of the U.S. Postal Service and as life-size wax statue at Madame Tussauds in New York City. The picture also inspired the controversial proposal for a bronze statue to be placed at the New York Fire Department, which never materialized because no agreement could be reached on replacing the three white men with a multicultural team – white, African-American, and Hispanic – of firefighters. The attempt to make the proposed statue multicultural follows the logic of Barthesian myth, suggesting broad consensus among the ethnically diverse American population in perceiving the firefighter as a positive embodiment of the nation-state USA. Referring to a model version of the statue, Susan Willis has argued: “In the guise of New York’s firefighters the statue embodies the nation and facilitates a shift from the local to the international, from the work of recovery to the work of war. As a sliding signifier, the statue enables the nation’s attention to move from Lower Manhattan to the new Iwo Jima in Kabul and Kandahar.” The two tableaux vivants at the Super Bowl performance reinforce this shift through the explicit juxtaposition of the live enactment of the “original” Iwo Jima image with the live enactment of the raising of the American flag at Ground Zero. Again, this shift emphasizes the move from the national to the international, from the civilian to the militaristic. In this way, the performance becomes a patriotic support of the American war effort.

One year later, on January 26, 2003, the Dixie Chicks sang “The Star-Spangled Banner” at the Super Bowl, broadcast live by ABC. In retrospect, the patriotic character of their performance may seem atypical, as the Dixie Chicks are now best known for their anti-war announcement made at a concert in London, on March 10, 2003, stating that they were ashamed that President Bush is from Texas, the home state of the Dixie Chicks. As a result, the Dixie Chicks were boycotted by the major country radio channels, heavily criticized by fans, and shunned by fellow country singers, a backlash which has been documented in the film Shut Up & Sing (Barbara Kopple and Cecilia Peck, 2006). Yet, before the controversy, the Dixie Chicks were considered to be the most popular female singers of country music, a genre that has a long tradition of explicit pro-military patriotism. At the next Super Bowl, broadcast live by NBC on February 1, 2004, “The Star-Spangled Banner” was performed by Beyoncé Knowles. As a young African-American R&B singer, Beyoncé was
immediately compared to Whitney Houston, including by Beyoncé herself on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (20 February 2004), telling the audience that singing “The Star-Spangled Banner” became her dream after seeing Houston’s performance live on television.

The connection to the military is made explicit immediately at the opening of both ceremonies. The national anthem by the Dixie Chicks starts with a medium shot of the crew of the U.S.S. Preble, a guided missile destroyer of the U.S. Navy, with the announcer stating that the performance is “to honor America and our service men and women around the world.” The performance by Beyoncé starts with the announcer introducing the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Peter Pace, who is shown in close-up, “representing our sailors, soldiers, airmen, marines, and coast guards serving our nation with pride around the world,” followed by a word of gratitude: “To our military services we say thank you for your dedication and professionalism in protecting America’s freedom.” Subsequently, General Pace escorts Beyoncé to the stage, where she, dressed in an elegant white women’s suit, sings “The Star-Spangled Banner.” When Beyoncé sings “… so proudly we hailed …,” a live connection is made to American soldiers stationed at Camp Freedom Rest in Baghdad, Iraq, watching the performance. Similar to Whitney Houston’s grand finale in 1991, the explicit connection to the military is repeated at the end of the ceremonies with military aircraft flying over the stadium. The performance by the Dixie Chicks ends with a fly-over of Super Hornet strike fighters by the VFA-122 Flying Eagles from the Naval Air Station Lemoore, while the Beyoncé performance ends with a fly-over of four Apache attack helicopters by the Texas National Guard.

Different from those of 1991 and 2002, however, the performances by the Dixie Chicks and Beyoncé do include the athletes of the football teams (in 2003, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers beat the Oakland Raiders; in 2004, the New England Patriots beat the Carolina Panthers). In the case of the Dixie Chicks, eleven close-ups of both black and white football players from both teams alternate with shots of military personnel, including a veteran in the audience, emphasizing the connection between the athletes and the military. During the 2004 performance by Beyoncé, the military is not present on the field, with the exception of the uniformed flag bearers. Also here the main focus is on the athletes, with seven close-ups of football players, again both black and white from both teams. In addition, the American flag is less prominently present in the performances of 2003 and 2004 than in those of 1991 and 2002. The Dixie Chicks performance does include two medium shots of a giant American flag on the field and one close-up of the American flag when the Dixie Chicks sing “… of the brave.” In the Beyoncé performance, the conventional giant
American flag on the field has been replaced by the giant red-white-and-blue logo of the National Football League, which does include the flag’s stars and stripes. Yet, like the Whitney Houston performance, the audience is prominently visible, holding (rather than waving) American flags as banners in their hands, thereby creating a large visual sea of red, white, and blue. On the one hand, the performances by the Dixie Chicks and Beyoncé differ from the performances by Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey, as they emphasize the athletes over explicit signs of military prowess, suggesting that the performances of 1991 and 2002 are stronger expressions of American patriotism, connected to specific moments in history which warrant such support, respectively the Gulf War and 9/11. On the other hand, however, the similarities between all four performances remain striking, showing that American patriotism and the military presence have become generic elements of the annual Super Bowl performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

The 2004 Super Bowl performance by Beyoncé was overshadowed by the controversy of the halftime show. When pop star Justin Timberlake tore off a part of singing partner Janet Jackson’s costume, thereby exposing her naked right breast, the incident became a hot international news item and a topic of public debate about the lack of decency on American national television. The Federal Communication Commission (FCC) announced that it would investigate the incident. In a hearing before the Senate Commerce Committee, FCC chairman Michael Powell stated that the “now infamous display during the Super Bowl halftime show, which represented a new low in prime-time television, is just the latest example in a growing list of deplorable incidents over the nation’s airwaves.” Making an explicit reference to the American nation-state, Powell added, “Our nation’s children, parents, and citizens deserve better.”

This incident is significant as it exposes the lack of public discussion about the use of the Super Bowl as a forum for American patriotism and support for the American war effort. While a nude breast at the Super Bowl can lead to heated public debate and senatorial investigation, the overwhelming display of military power at the very same sports event remains uncontested. This suggests that the Barthesian myth is indeed effective, as, through the Super Bowl performances, the positive representation of American military power and American patriotism becomes naturalized and justified, without being contested or countered by oppositional arguments.

Although negotiated and oppositional readings of the four performances of “The Star-Spangled Banner” are possible (not all Americans watching the Super Bowl will recognize themselves in the national identity that is being constructed, and not all non-Americans watching the Super Bowl will accept the presented national identity as representative of “America”), the intertwining
of sports, the military, patriotism, and popular entertainment presents a combination that remains difficult to resist. Bordering on propaganda, these performances of “The Star-Spangled Banner” use the double function of the American flag as national symbol and as advertising logo to represent American patriotism, to paraphrase Roland Barthes, as innocent and natural, not as an explanation, but as a statement of fact. In the end, the performances of the national anthem by Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey, the Dixie Chicks, and Beyoncé do not provide an invitation to question the role of the nation-state USA in international politics, but instead justify its military action of “protecting freedom around the world” by assuring the audience that the American flag is indeed still there.

America in the Desert of Hollywood

In *Imagining America at War*, Cynthia Weber analyzes war films that were shown in the American cinemas immediately after 9/11, ranging from *Pearl Harbor* (Michael Bay, 2001) and *We Were Soldiers* (Randall Wallace, 2002) to *Black Hawk Down* (Ridley Scott, 2001) and *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002), suggesting that these films help to understand what it means to be American. As Weber points out, while both World War II and the Vietnam War are prominently present in the American cinematic discourse, the Gulf War remains conspicuously underrepresented. Compared to the amount of Hollywood movies set during World War II and the Vietnam War, including recent ones, the absence of the Gulf War in Hollywood film is indeed significant. Exceptions include the action film *The Finest Hour* (Shimon Dotan, 1991), starring Rob Lowe as an American Navy SEAL who goes to Iraq in search of biomedical weapons, and the courthouse drama *Courage under Fire* (Edward Zwick, 1996), starring Denzel Washington and Meg Ryan. One could also perceive the science fiction of *Starship Troopers* (Paul Verhoeven, 1997) as an allegory of the Gulf War. Yet, the notable exceptions are *Three Kings* (David O. Russell, 1999), which is set in Iraq right after the Gulf War has ended, and *Jarhead* (Sam Mendes, 2005), based on the memoirs by former Gulf War soldier Anthony Swofford. Although the films differ significantly, they do share two important characteristics. First, both *Three Kings* and *Jarhead* present the Gulf War in a surrealist setting, emphasized by the way the films use visual special effects and saturated colors to portray the desert as an alienating space. Second, both films use Hollywood cinema and American pop music as main points of reference, thereby explicitly connecting the international politics of the Gulf War to the globally mediated American pop culture.
Jean Baudrillard’s notion that the Gulf War did not take place is present in both films. *Three Kings* starts with the onscreen text “March 1991. The war just ended,” followed by the voice of soldier Troy Barlow (Mark Wahlberg), shouting “Are we shooting?” right before he kills his first and only Iraqi soldier. “I didn’t think I’d see someone get shot in this war,” his fellow soldier Conrad Vig (Spike Jonze) dryly comments, not realizing that the war is in fact over. By setting all the action immediately after the war has ended, *Three Kings* emphasizes that the preceding Gulf War in itself was a non-event. *Jarhead*, in its turn, takes place before, during, and after Operation Desert Storm, but most of the film focuses on the American soldiers waiting in the desert for the war to begin, spending their time alternating between masturbating and cleaning their rifles, a rather obvious but effective analogy which reinforces the connection between masculinity and warfare, foregrounding the frustrating male impotence of not being able to fulfill the act of “real” sex and “real” war. Baudrillard also makes such a connection by discussing the Gulf War as a striptease inviting futile masturbation, “following the calculated escalation of undressing and approaching the incandescent point of explosion (like that of erotic effusion) but at the same time withdrawing from it and maintaining a deceptive suspense (teasing), such that when the naked body finally appears, it is no longer naked, desire no longer exists and the orgasm is cut short.”32 Indeed, once Operation Desert Storm eventually begins, the *Jarhead* soldiers soon realize the war is being fought – literally – over their heads, by the air force’s smart bombing. When Anthony “Swoff” Swofford (Jake Gyllenhaal), trained as a Marine Corps Scout Sniper, is finally about to kill his first Iraqi officer, he does not get permission to shoot, as the whole military base will be bombed soon anyway. Thus, after months of anticipation, Swoff does not get to fire his rifle. His orgasmic shot is cut short.

While *Jarhead* uses the non-eventness of the Gulf War as backdrop to the main protagonist’s coming-of-age narrative (“every man has his own war” is the film's tagline), *Three Kings* replaces the non-event with an exciting in-search-of-the-hidden-treasure adventure which evolves into a conventional American-as-savior narrative. In their search for the hidden gold, looted from Kuwait by the Iraqi army, Archie Gates (George Clooney), Chief Elgin (Ice Cube), Troy Barlow, and Conrad Vig encounter a group of dissident Iraqis who, with their families, try to flee Iraq. When a dissident Iraqi woman is executed by the Iraqi army, in front of her husband and her children, the American soldiers make a choice. Although initially motivated by their greed for gold, the American soldiers heroically save the refugees by guiding them into freedom, which, rather ironically, is found across the border in Iran. This storyline can be viewed as a criticism of American international policy, as the film suggests.
that the interests of the USA are based solely on securing the oil supply, in spite of its rhetoric of promoting democracy around the world. Moreover, *Three Kings* explicitly states that the American government has let the Iraqi people down by not following up its promise to protect them. As Archie Gates, played by the film’s main movie star George Clooney, tells his soldiers (and, in extension, the audience): “Bush told the [Iraqi] people to rise up against Saddam. They thought they’d have our support. They don’t. Now they’re getting slaughtered.” In other words, the film does not criticize American imperialism in itself, but merely its execution by the Bush administration. The choice made by Archie Gates and his fellow military men conforms to the Hollywood convention of the independent hero who defies the power of the authorities so he can do the right thing. In this way, *Three Kings* ends up reinforcing the image of an ideal America as the protector of freedom and democracy, not questioning if the American presence in Iraq was justified, but why the USA failed to do its job. In his analysis of the film, Jude Davies suggests that such a reading is too limited, as *Three Kings* contains “ideological structures of sameness and difference [which] continue to play along and across the film’s narratives to create multiple and sometimes contradictory poles of Americanness.”³³ Although Davies makes a convincing argument, showing that a less hegemonic reading is indeed possible, the movie’s overall American-as-savior narrative remains dominant, favoring an ideal America as global peacekeeper over a more critical perspective on the imperialism of the nation-state USA.

Compared to *Three Kings*, *Jarhead* is less explicit about the role the USA plays, focusing more on the senselessness of the war experience in general than on the specific politics of the Gulf War. Perhaps the most critical moment of the film is when Swoff’s unit comes across the infamous Highway of Death, the road between Kuwait and Basra that was heavily bombed by the American air force, leaving a long trail of burnt-out vehicles and charred corpses. On the one hand, the scene works as a reminder that smart bombing causes real death, which is emphasized when Swoff is isolated from his unit and joins a circle of “sitting” burned dead bodies. This scene prompted Cynthia Fuchs to comment: “The effect is more harrowing than any battle sequence, underlining *Jarhead’s* anguished point: war is not heroic or rousing. It is only devastating.”³⁴ Yet, on the other hand, such portrayal of devastation and, in particular, Swoff’s identification with the dead Iraqi bodies, can also function as, repeating Baudrillard’s earlier quoted words, “an alibi for those who do not want to have been excited for nothing,” an attempt to prove that “this war was indeed a war and not a shameful and pointless hoax.”³⁵ The scene says more about Swoff’s character development (his realization that he is involved in “real” war) than the actual politics of the Gulf War, and, in extension, more about America than Iraq.
Here a connection can be made between Hollywood films depicting the war in Vietnam and the two Gulf War films. In *America*, Jean Baudrillard argues that the Vietnam War was won by both sides: “by the Vietnamese on the ground, [and] by the Americans in the electronic mental space. And if the one side won an ideological and political victory, the other made *Apocalypse Now* and that has gone right around the world.”

The significant point is that the “real” Vietnam War has been taken over by the Vietnam War as mediated by Hollywood, as the latter has shaped its global perception. In a similar way, the hyperreality of the Gulf War, as broadcast live on television and as fictionalized by Hollywood with *Three Kings* and *Jarhead*, reduces the war’s political reality to an American conception of the Gulf War. Moreover, such a perception is framed by the cinematic experience of the Vietnam War. In *Three Kings*, the American soldiers drive their Humvee through the desert, throwing footballs in the air as shooting targets, referring to the scene from *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) in which the American soldiers are waterskiing and firing at Vietnam locals while going down the river on an army patrol boat. In *Jarhead*, the soldiers clap and cheer when watching *Apocalypse Now’s* famous scene in which the American military violently attacks a Vietnamese village while Richard Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries” is blasting out of helicopter loudspeakers as form of psychological warfare. Vietnam films function like pornography for a soldier in training, “getting him ready for his First Fuck,” writes Anthony Swofford in his memoirs, and thus “Vietnam films are all pro-war, no matter what the supposed message, what Kubrick or Coppola or Stone intended.”

While during the Vietnam War the psychological warfare by the American army included loud broadcasts of Wagner, during the Gulf War they played rock music of the 1960s and 1970s, such as “Beach Boys, AC/DC, and Jimi Hendrix’s shrill ‘Star-Spangled Banner,’ repeated ad nauseam until the enemy submits out of sheer annoyance.” When in *Jarhead* “Break on Through” by the Doors is blasting out of a helicopter’s speakers, Swoff complains: “That’s Vietnam music, man. Can’t we get our own fucking music?” In his memoirs, Anthony Swofford expands on why this music does not belong in his Gulf War. “It was fine in the movies, … but I don’t need the Who and the Doors in my war, as I prepare to fight for or lose my life. Teenage wasteland, my ass. This is the other side.”

In both *Three Kings* and *Jarhead* the Gulf War soldiers eventually do get their “own music,” shifting from the cinematic Vietnam War to contemporary American pop culture. Countercultural rock became Vietnam music, African-American rap the sound of the Gulf War. The opening sequence of *Three Kings*, after Troy Barlow has killed the Iraqi soldier, starts with Rare Earth’s “I Just Want To Celebrate” from 1971, a song from the Vietnam era,
its upbeat rhythm emphasizing the playful images of hunky bare-chested soldiers sunbathing and jumping around, followed by the soldiers singing along to Lee Greenwood’s patriotic country hit song “God Bless the USA,” originally released in 1984 and revived as a Gulf War anthem. The celebration continues with the soldiers dancing to two contemporary rap and dance songs, Public Enemy’s “Can’t Do Nuttin’ for Ya Man” and Snap!’s “The Power.” In Jarhead, the end of the war is celebrated in a similar way. When Swoff and fellow soldier Troy (Peter Sarsgaard) return from their special mission, they first wander through the desolate desert, only to stumble upon their unit partying around a large bonfire in the middle of nowhere, dancing to Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power,” and firing their rifles into the air. The irony is not lost. The soldiers only get to shoot their rifles once the war is over, while they celebrate the American victory by chanting along to a rap song that induces its listeners to “fight the power” of American authority and its white patriotism as embodied by its pop-cultural heroes Elvis Presley and John Wayne.

This diegetic music, both the psychological warfare and the dance songs of the victory parties, enhances the surrealist quality of the desert, which, as mentioned before, is expressed in Three Kings and Jarhead through the use of visual special effects and saturated colors. Three Kings even provides a warning that its “visual distortion and unusual colors” are intentional, meant “to enhance the emotional intensity of the storyline.” The desert functions as an empty space, in which the combination of surrealist visuals and overwhelming sounds evokes a feeling of alienation. The desert can also be perceived as a Baudrillardian hyperreality, as a space without an origin. Its hyperreality lies not so much in the fact that both films were shot in the deserts of southern California and in Hollywood studios, thus “really” being part of the American rather than the Iraqi landscape. More relevant is the symbolic quality of the desert as the embodiment of an imagined America, like Baudrillard encountered when traveling through the USA. Deserts are so fascinating, writes Baudrillard, “because you are delivered from all depth there – a brilliant, mobile, superficial neutrality, a challenge to meaning and profundity, a challenge to nature and culture, an outer hyperspace, with no origin, no reference-points.” Applied to the Gulf War, the Iraqi desert becomes a Hollywood desert, just another image in the endless stream of images that American pop culture mediates globally. In his review of Three Kings, Sight & Sound film critic Jim Hoberman recognizes such a connection: “Operating at the far frontier of television space, [the] heroes cannot help but find America.” This America that Hoberman refers to is not the nation-state USA, but an imagined America consisting of consumer goods and media images. The heroes of Three Kings enter bunkers all filled with western consumer goods, looted by the Iraqi army during its invasion of Kuwait.

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One of the looted televisions shows footage of the Rodney King video, containing images of the African-American taxi driver being beaten by four white Los Angeles police officers. Shot on March 3, 1991, and televised worldwide almost immediately, the video sparked protests against racism and police brutality, eventually leading to the Los Angeles riots of 1992. As several scholars have suggested, the televised violence against Rodney King cannot be disassociated from the mostly non-televised violence by the American army in Iraq. In this way, the Gulf War desert becomes another part of America where the Three Kings and Jarhead soldiers encounter a seemingly empty space that is not only being penetrated by the American military, but which also has been permeated with American media and pop culture.

The global presence of American pop culture is made even more explicit when, in addition to Rodney King, Michael Jackson pops up in the desert of Three Kings. While in 1985 Michael Jackson (when “We Are the World” was recorded, as discussed in chapter one) could be viewed as an embodiment of the American Dream, by 1991 his star image had become tarnished. Michael Jackson came to be known as “Wacko Jacko” based on rumors about him sleeping in a hyperbaric chamber, the alleged whitening of his skin, and the cosmetic alterations to his nose and body. His controversial image intensified later on in the 1990s with his self-proclaimed title of being the “King of Pop,” his short marriage to Lisa Marie Presley, daughter of that other American “king,” Elvis, and accusations of child molestation. In a 1987 Village Voice essay, entitled “I’m White!: What’s Wrong with Michael Jackson,” Greg Tate perceives Jackson as “a casualty of America’s ongoing race war – another Negro gone mad because his mirror reports that his face does not conform to the Nordic ideal.” In Three Kings, the issue reappears when Mark Wahlberg’s character Troy Barlow is captured and tortured by the Iraqi army officer Captain Said, the latter played by the Moroccan-French actor Saïd Taghmaoui. “What is the problem with Michael Jackson?” asks Said, giving the answer himself: “Your country make him chop up his face. Michael Jackson is pop king of sick fucking country. A black man make the skin white and the hair straight, and you know why? Your sick fucking country make the black man hate hisself just like you hate the Arab and the children you bomb over here.” Similar to the Rodney King video, the appearance of Michael Jackson ties the American presence in Iraq to practices of racism in the USA, thereby giving Jackson’s initial role as an ideological ambassador of the American values propagated by “We Are the World” an ironic twist. Yet, the use of Jackson to suggest that the American military presence in Iraq is rooted in racism also reinforces the global dominance of American pop culture, continuing to render the devastation in Iraq invisible by shaping the Gulf War within an American conception of the world.
“Welcome to the desert of the real,” says Orpheus (Laurence Fishburne), when he reveals to Neo (Keanu Reeves) that his idea of the world is actually a computer-generated virtual reality called “the matrix,” masking a complex system of artificial intelligence which uses living humans as source of energy. The desert of the real, as shown to Neo, consists of a burnt and desolate landscape, an American city ruined by war. With this pivotal scene, the Hollywood blockbuster *The Matrix* (Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski, 1999) makes an explicit reference to Jean Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality, as Morpheus is quoting from his *Simulacra and Simulation*, originally published in French in 1981. The film knowingly cites Baudrillard, as in an earlier scene, Neo is shown owning a copy of the book. “Welcome to the Desert of the Real!” is also the title of an essay by Slavoj Žižek, published right after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and later expanded to a five-essay book edition. As Žižek suggests, 9/11 could function as a “Welcome to the desert of the real” moment, enabling American citizens to realize that they, like Neo, have been living in some sort of virtual reality, far removed from the reality of global politics:

Either America will persist in, strengthen even, the attitude, “Why should this happen to us? Things like this don’t happen here!” … or America will finally risk stepping through the fantasmatic screen separating it from the Outside World, accepting its arrival into the Real world, making the long-overdue move from “Things like this should not happen here!” to “Things like this should not happen anywhere!” America’s “holiday from history” was a fake: America’s peace was bought by the catastrophes going on elsewhere. Therein resides the true lesson of the bombings.

Just like Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) in *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998) realizes that his life so far has been a television reality show, Žižek suggests that America may come to perceive American life as a hyperreality, as a blockbuster movie which has been surpassed by the reality of 9/11.

Jean Baudrillard recognizes a similar function for 9/11 in his essay “L’Esprit du Terrorisme,” written only a few days after September 11, by describing the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center not as a non-event (as he did with the first Gulf War), but as “the absolute event, the ‘mother event,’ the pure event that concentrates in itself all the events that never took place.” This does not mean that 9/11 signifies “a resurgence of the real,” but an accelerated state of hyperreality, taken to its fullest extreme. With 9/11, Baudrillard suggests, reality has “absorbed fiction’s energy, and has itself become fiction,”
in the form of an absolute media event existing of the televised image, to which “the real is superadded … like a bonus of terror, like an additional frisson: not only is it terrifying, but, what is more, it is real.” 49 Similar to his aforementioned argument that fiction shapes imagination in the form of reality, Jean Baudrillard argues that the “fictional” media event of 9/11, the repeated images of planes flying into the Twin Towers, shot from many different angles, has turned the imagination of the Hollywood disaster movie into images of reality.

In retrospect, however, America seems to have taken Slavoj Žižek’s first option, remaining behind its fantasmatic screen of Hollywood and television. By 2006, 9/11 has been fictionalized and dramatized in films like United 93 (Paul Greengrass, 2006) and World Trade Center (Oliver Stone, 2006), which, conform the conventions of Hollywood, emphasize the heroism of individual Americans, such as common plane passengers and New York City firefighters. On television, the controversial two-episode miniseries The Path to 9/11 (ABC, 10 and 11 September 2006), although more critical of the role of the American government, also focused on the personalized story of the real-life John P. O’Neill, played on the small screen by Harvey Keitel, who had just started his job as head of security at the Twin Towers a couple of days before being killed. Even counter-narratives, such as the documentary Fahrenheit 9/11 (Michael Moore, 2004), stay behind the fantasmatic screen, using similar strategies of fictionalization and dramatization as Hollywood cinema. In spite of being critical of the politics of the nation-state USA, these counter-narratives reconfirm rather than undermine the idealism of an imagined America.

Although belonging to different genres, the pop-cultural performances that have been analyzed in this chapter all contribute to an American conception of the world, yet in distinctive different ways. The Super Bowl performances of “The Star-Spangled Banner” by Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey, the Dixie Chicks, and Beyoncé turn an American national event into an expression of support of the international politics of the nation-state USA, whereas films like Three Kings and Jarhead turn the international event of warfare into a personalized American experience. Nevertheless, in all cases, American pop culture, embodied by these pop and movie stars, is used to shape the American conception of international politics, thereby not only reinforcing the myth of the American Dream as an uncontested universal ideal but also rendering other perspectives invisible. In this manner, these pop-cultural artifacts can be perceived as being part of a hyperreal America, as they express the American experience as fiction which shapes, as Baudrillard suggests, imagination into the form of reality. Moreover, this hyperreal America transcends the geographical boundaries of the nation-state USA, as it is being mediated through pop culture around the world.
The global dominance of American pop culture unexpectedly became clear in an incident during the first Gulf War, when the female American soldier Melissa Rathbun-Nealy was captured by the Iraqi army. In stark contrast to the widely publicized story of Jessica Lynch, who became the face of the second Gulf War, little attention has been paid to the Rathbun-Nealy story. Rather than being heroically saved by the American Special Forces, Rathbun-Nealy was released by the Iraqi army after the Gulf War was officially over. Back in the USA, she did not have much to say about her experience, merely stating that the Iraqi officials had treated her well. Moreover, they had complimented her for being as “brave as [Sylvester] Stallone and as beautiful as Brooke Shields.”

It is this power of American pop culture, irresistible for Americans and non-Americans alike, which will assure that America’s holiday from history is far from over.