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"Inspired by real events"
MEDIA (AND) MEMORY IN STEVEN SPIELBERG'S MUNICH (2005)

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Steven Spielberg's 2005 film *Munich* (2005) tells the story of an Israeli counter-terrorist team in the aftermath of the hijacking and massacre at the Olympic Games in 1972. The film spawned broad discussion about its historical accuracy and its political standpoint. While criticism primarily focused on the historiographical representation of the actions depicted, this paper analyzes in two steps the genuinely filmic mode of historical representation of *Munich*. First, the analysis discusses the interplay of two conflicting narrative strategies that negotiate the character development with the political struggle. And second, analysis focuses on the two formal devices at the core of the narrative conflict: The reflexive framing of television in the depiction of the Munich massacre as a traumatic media event and the excessive transformation of its memory in a series of flashbacks. Such elaboration of the narrative and formal strategies reveals the implicit historiographical structures of the film and suggests that the notion of 'cultural trauma' serves as the preferential—but problematic—template in telling the history of terrorism and violence.

Le film de Steven Spielberg, *Munich* (2005), raconte l'histoire d'une cellule antiterroriste israélienne suite à la prise d'otages et du massacre qui marquèrent les Jeux Olympiques de 1972. Le film suscita de nombreux débats quant à son exactitude historique et son positionnement politique. À la différence des critiques qui se concentrèrent initialement sur la représentation historiographique des actions dépeintes, cet article analyse en deux étapes le mode filmique de la représentation historique de Munich. En premier lieu, il s'agit d'analyser l'interaction de deux stratégies narratives concurrentes qui confrontent le développement des personnages avec le combat politique. Ensuite l'analyse se concentre sur deux procédés formels au cœur de ce conflit narratif : la mise en scène réflexive de la télévision dans la représentation du massacre de Munich en tant que qu'événement médiatique traumatique, et la transformation excessive de son souvenir à travers une série de flashbacks. Une telle construction des stratégies narrative et formelle révèle les structures historiographiques implicites du film et suggère que la notion de « traumatisme culturel » nourrit la trame privilégiée – mais problématique – du récit de l'histoire du terrorisme et de la violence.

A Reel Event

With his film *Munich* (2005), Steven Spielberg showed twofold virtuosity: Not only did he show his skill in crafting powerful cinematic narratives but he made this movie into a public event, triggering an intense debate. Opening with the slogan "inspired by real events" (fig. 1), the film employs a rhetoric device commonly used to claim a story's authentic reference to historical events.

Critical reception readily applied such reading and committed itself to a broad discussion about its historical accuracy and the political standpoint taken by Spielberg in evaluating the history of the Middle East conflict. Consequentially, the film about the Munich hijacking of and massacre of eleven members of the Israeli Olympic team by the Palestinian terrorist organization *Black September* in 1972 and the subsequent hunt for the organizers by an Israeli intelligence service team was questioned in respect of historiographical categories: Was there an obligation for historical truth, especially when portraying historical figures like Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir and using historic footage from the event's television coverage (see Melman/ Hartov)? Which historical actions and accounts have been selected and, in contrast, which ones have been omitted as source and elements of the film, especially when held against the moral interpretations derived from it (see Goldberg)?[1] Finally, the question arises, whether the mode of representation was adequate for making reasonable claims about the serious issues in contrast to the allegations of mere sensationalism and exploitation of sex and violence (see Wieseltier)?

While these questions were pondered from a vastly diverse range of standpoints, the reviews declared unanimous consent regarding the allegoric dimension of the film, seeing the September 11 attacks and the following 'war on terror' as the real 'real events' it

FIG. 1, 2.

was inspired by. The explicit rhetoric of Spielbergian cinema readily paves the way for such allegoric reading on virtually all filmic layers, eventually culminating in the final shot presenting the Manhattan skyline with the then newly built World Trade Center back in 1973 (fig. 2).

Munich starts with the terrorist action turning into a media event broadcasted live, continues with joint military and intelligence reprisals against the (possible) organizers and other 'enemies of the state' under the impression of this initial shock, and leading to an increasingly painful pondering over one's own value system in the light of those reprisals: Avner Kaufman and his team easily lend themselves as silver screen for the projection of American power in the wake of 9/11 as they inexorably drift into a spiral of violence that forces them first and foremost to reconcile their notions of home and identity.

The director himself claimed it to be "a prayer for peace" (Spielberg, as qtd. in Schickel 236), solely meant to raise questions about

the conflict and refusing easy solutions for terrorism in general and the Middle Eastern conflict in particular. The film's nomination for the Academy Award shows the broad acceptance of Spielberg's projection of America post-9/11 into the realm of the Middle Eastern conflict,[2] mirrored in the account of critic Michelle Goldberg: "*Munich* is about the way vengeance and violence—even necessary, justified violence—corrupt both their victims and their perpetrators. It's about the struggle to maintain some bedrock morality while engaging in immorality" (Goldberg). Despite the considerably numerous indicators for the nuanced portrayal of the different sides, as well as the different acts of violence and/or terrorism (see Foy), such dialectics were quickly charged with allegations of moral relativism:

> The Israeli response to Black September marked the birth of contemporary counterterrorism, and it is difficult not to see *Munich* as a parable of American policy since September 11. "Every civilization finds it necessary to negotiate compromises with its own values," Golda Meir grimly concludes early in the film. Yet the film proclaims that terrorists and counterterrorists are alike. "When we learn to act like them, we will defeat them!" declares one of Avner's men, played by Daniel Craig, already with a license to kill. Worse, *Munich* prefers a discussion of counterterrorism to a discussion of terrorism; or it thinks that they are the same discussion. This is an opinion that only people who are not responsible for the safety of other people can hold. (Wieseltier)

Apart from Leon Wieseltier's most obvious mistake, which was to take a random statement in a film as its overall message, his further critique echoes a principal rejection of Hollywood's popular culture for being inherently apolitical:

FIG. 3, 4.

> No doubt *Munich* will be admired for its mechanical symmetries, which will be called complexity. But this is not complexity, it is strategy. I mean of the marketing kind: […] *Munich* is desperate not to be charged with a point of view. It is animated by a sense of tragedy and a dream of peace, which all good people share, but which in Hollywood is regarded as a dissent, and also as a point of view. […] For the only side that Steven Spielberg ever takes is the side of the movies. (Wieseltier)

Likewise does George Jonas' review "The Spielberg massacre" locate the assumed failure of *Munich* in its imperative of cinematic entertainment. Jonas, author of *Vengeance: The True Story of an Israeli Counter-Terrorist Team*, the book *Munich* is based on, claims and accuses: "My book was all about avenging evil. Then the King of Hollywood got hold of it" (Jonas "Spielberg"). He points at his own research and fully dismisses the character psychology developed in *Munich*, thus emphatically refuting the films disclaimer

"inspired by real events." At the core of his argument, he criticizes the way Spielberg and his co-writer Tony Kushner "in their effort not to demonize humans, Spielberg and Kushner end up humanizing demons" (Jonas "Spielberg").

For Jonas, the epitome of Spielberg's mistreatment of his subject matter is to be found in a crucial flashback, showing a sex scene of main protagonist Avner Kauffman intercut with the Munich massacre (figs. 3 and 4). This particular scene was not only labeled equally vulgar and sensationalist in other reviews, it also hints at the substantial differences between *Munich* and an earlier filmic adaptation of the book, the 1986 TV-production *Sword of Gideon* by Michael Anderson: It refrains entirely from using flashbacks as a narrative device to construct its plot and in doing so, it also employs a differing psychological conflict structure for the main protagonist.

Against this background, the flashback scenes in *Munich* are significant examples for the problem encountered, when trying to relate a narrative and fictional media product to its foregoing reality or its foregoing narratives claiming a closer relation to this reality: The arbitrariness of a particular narrative and narrative in general. Kristin Thompson assesses this problem in the framework of neoformalist film theory:

> This total absorption in narrative has some unpleasant consequences for the act of viewing. The viewer may be capable of understanding the narrative, but has no context in which to place that understanding: the underlying arbitrariness of the narrative is hidden by structures of motivation and naturalization. A narrative is a chain of causes and effects, but, unlike the real world, the narrative world requires one initial cause which itself has no cause. The choice of this initial cause is one source of the arbitrariness of narrative. Also, once the hermeneutic and proairetic codes are openend in a narrative, there is nothing which logically determines how long the narrative will continue; more and more delays could prolong the chain of cause and effect indefinitely. This the initiation, progression, and closure of fictional narratives is largely arbitrary. Narratives are not logical in themselves; they only make use of logic. (497)

In consequence, we might be able to refrain for a moment from looking through the lens of 'naturalizing' representation and from projecting the *Munich* onto the real event, but rather focus on the 'reel event'—which means to follow its inner mechanics in the terms of the filmic narration in the framework of its formal and aesthetic devices. Far from being a self-sufficient academic exercise this leads the way towards a sustaining explanation, how the medium film accomplishes the allegorical transfer and historical connection between two, after all, different historical events. And it shows that being on "the side of the movies" not necessarily implies being apolitical, as Wieseltier suggests. Quite on the contrary, I want to argue, that the political dimension of *Munich* lies in its filmic conception, rather than in its mere depiction of the 'real' world. After all, this is because the interpretative schemes allowing for a historically based representation are as much engrained in the basic narrative and filmic structures of the medium.

Conflicting Narratives: The Archaic and the Modern

Starting on such premise, one must not only ask which story is told in *Munich*, but also what kind of story and how it is told. In his review for *Variety* Todd McCarthy discovers a generic conflict, assessing that "the director's long-gestating meditative thriller […] takes its own sweet time making obvious points about the Jewish nation compromising its

own values, and in the process forgets to be a pulse-quickening suspenser." And while elsewhere it is explicitly hailed that "*Munich* defies easy labeling" by showing "moral and ethical elements, layered atop a story that is ripe with suspense" (Berardinelli), McCarthy only sees a "lumpy and overlong morality play on a failed thriller template" (McCarthy). While generic categories are helpful in attuning production decisions to audience expectation, they often are concepts too broad to provide an analytical close reading of one particular film. For instance, calling *Munich* a thriller certainly leads to the quick confirmation that it indeed shows its central elements, 'suspense' and 'surprise' being the predominant ones in the films communication with the spectator (see Bordwell/ Thompson 113). Sticking to the generic scheme then might lead to problems in accounting for the hybridity of the film, as in our case for instance the aforementioned "moral and ethical elements" (Berardinelli), which seem to extend beyond the thriller genre, no matter if they are judged a valuable surplus or rather a unnecessary nuisance slowing down the action.

For example, regarding the development of main protagonist Avner Kauffman's moral conscience, we encounter several scenes showing Avner pondering over his decisions, usually depicted by symbolizing the double-mindedness by showing his face half-lit, half-shady.

This can serve the generic suspense, for instance when placed in the course of an attack mission (fig. 5)—but especially after the film successively progresses to his state of disillusion, the weighing of the double-mindedness stops serving this function (fig. 6).

To surpass the limitations of the genre concept and reach an integrated analytical account, the first part of the analysis employs a basic model of narration drawn from Rick Altman's *A Theory of Narrative* (2008). Moving away

FIG. 5, 6.

from the (neo-)formalist conceptions of narration, primarily focused on the interplay between plot and story, for Altman "[t]he existence of narrative depends on the simultaneous and coordinated presence of action and character" (15). Narrational activity then is organized by "following" the characters in their actions, thus being the very act of creating meaning through the creation of a relational order between the single elements of action by succession.

As his central analytical unit, Altman uses the concept of the "following-unit," being "a series of segments each made up of that portion of the text where a character (or group of characters) is followed continuously" (22). Stringing together following-units happens by the act of "modulation", sub-divided in the categories metonymic, metaphoric, and hyperbolic: While the metonymic modulation between following units implies a spatial connection between sequences (24), the metaphoric modulation rather operates by similarity or even analogy of concepts (25). The category of the hyperbolic

in contrast eschews the plausible connection and foregrounds the very lack of explicit connection (25–26).[3] A narrative then can be described as the pattern that emerges from the modulation of the following units: a more or less distinctive "following pattern" allowing the spectator to understand and thereby map out the fictional filmic world (291–97). Based on this model, Altman subsequently develops three broad categories of narrative systems that describe the constitutive modes of narration in 'Western' culture (338–40) along with what might be called their division of focus, its fundamental categories being *single focus*, *dual focus*, and *multiple focus*.

Applied to *Munich*, the model reveals a scheme following the main protagonist Avner Kauffman for the most part of the film: After the initial sequence unfolding the Munich hijacking and its immediate consequences, the subsequent plot organizes its story along two conceptual strands: One follows the retaliation operations for the Munich hijacking alongside the political lines of the wider Middle East conflict; the other follows the development of Avner's family, beginning with his wife's pregnancy and the subsequent birth of his daughter, ending in in New York eventually. The following-units modulate according to the spatial logic of the events, starting from the mission onset for Avner in Israel to Switzerland for the formation of a five men operations unit, and afterwards to the various locations to prepare and execute the killing of their assassination targets defined by their supposed association with *Black September*. Action is alternating between Avner (in operation) with his team, Avner meeting intelligence informants, and Avner meeting his family—his mother on the one side and his wife and daughter on the other. After several successful killing operations failure sets in, resulting in the death of three of Avner's comrades, eventually ending the mission for Avner who moves to his family, meanwhile living in New York.

In this structure, we can almost fully recognize the central characteristics assigned to single focus narratives by Altman: The following pattern clearly "concentrates on a single individual" leading to "[a] text generated by a protagonist's desire, often expressed through a departure into previously unexplored territory, behavior, or thought" (189). This template surfaces in Avner's exploration of the counter-terrorist operations, previously unknown to him—as well as in his new role as a father. Evenly explicit are the "[s]econdary characters who serve as models for the protagonist, often taking the form of father figure, tempter, mediator, or teacher" (189). These can be found scattered across the ranks of his team, tending to represent different standpoints in the conflict, especially when evaluating the consequences of their violent operations (fig. 7).

Among the most dominant ones is the father figure of the French informant "Papa," who serves him with elderly advice in the absence of his real father. This is a significant variation to *Sword of Gideon*, where the personal conflict of Avner is mostly negotiated in conversation with his real father and the figure of the French informant does not exist at all.

Thus Avner oscillates between the role of the actor and the role of the observer: While we watch him negotiating his values, he himself watches how others negotiate "[v]alues that depend on private and personal questions (motivation, intention, thought), always subject to interpretation" (Altman 189). For instance, he is confronted with different concepts of "home:" One the one hand it is defined as his nation exemplified by Israeli prime minister Golda Meir, his own mother, and the intelligence leaders; on the other hand the term becomes increasingly coupled to his own family, deriving its notion from a rather private and apolitical framework (see also Klein 110–12).



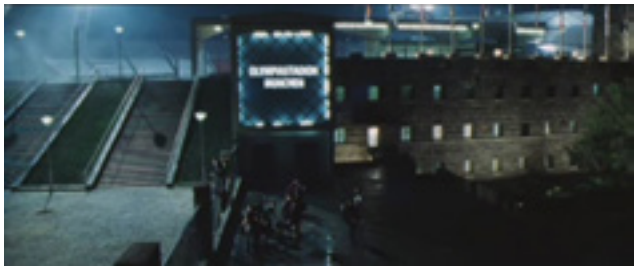


FIG. 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12.

Likewise, fitting the generalized shape of the single focus narrative, Avner's progress is continuously measured by "moral mirrors, repeated scenes, reiterated locations, or developmental metaphors" that organize the repeated alternation between the "presentation of an event and evaluation of an event" (Altman 189). For example, the killing operations of the Israeli team are always discussed and evaluated afterwards, usually in the framework of a shared meal. Thereby the meal motif is excessively played out while the doubts about their moral integrity are increasingly painful. In sum, *Munich* presents a classic single focus narrative, in which the value system of Avner Kauffman is explored: Starting in a rather stable framework of loyalty to his country he develops ethical doubts that lead him to a readjustment of his categories, eventually giving priority to his family as he cannot find a compromise with his political loyalty.

This consistent scheme would hold for the general interpretation of the film, if there weren't four rather 'cumbersome' following units, which, at least formally, do not fit the general pattern of the single focus narrative. These deviations from the single focus are of particular interest since they form the parts where the title event, the Munich hijacking, is brought into the movie beyond the explicit reference through character speech. And furthermore, except for the sketch of the media event, they do not occur in *Sword of Gideon*, thus particularly marking the narrative style chosen by Steven Spielberg in contrast to other adaptations of the story. The first one is at the beginning of the film: Immediately following the title "inspired by real events" the hijacking operation of Black September is entered at the fence of the Olympic village (fig. 8).

The characters followed are the hijackers entering the house of the Israeli team in a

strictly spatial fashion, until the beginning of the assault (fig. 9). Then the following extends into a sequence one could term the "global media event": In rapid chronological succession we see about[4] 16 distinctive sequences that alternate between the different locations and the different actors of the event. A multiplicity of actors, whose specific identity is not further clarified beyond their narrative functions, is shown, ranging from TV audiences in Israel and Palestine to the TV teams in Munich with their control rooms and reporters on location (fig. 10); and ranging from the Israelis officials in front of their TVs to the hijackers, victims and police forces in the Olympic Village watching TV themselves (fig. 11). This metonymic modulation is organized via the television screen as its interface, thereby extending the local space of the event into the wider space of TV exposure—eventually leading to the point when Avner Kauffman is involved watching television like everybody else (fig. 12). Remarkably, his appearance is not before the end of the 'event proper', but only during the memorial service for the eleven Israeli victims. On the one hand, this is already the onset of the single focus narrative following Avner Kauffman exclusively, but on the other hand there is still a metaphoric modulation to the control room of the Israeli intelligence service, where retaliation is prepared by showing the pictures and calling the names of the Palestinian organizers—notably in a striking analogy to the memorial service also based on the principle of showing and naming (fig. 13 and fig. 14).

The second, third, and fourth deviation from the single focus narrative clearly have an ambivalent status. Formally framed as (day) dreams of Avner, they seem to be sequels to the beginning of the hijacking, thus filling an ellipsis of action created by the portrayal of the event as media event sketched out above. Seen from such perspective, they also resemble a flashback. While the formal problem of the

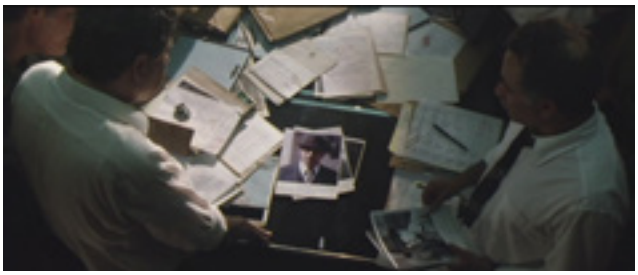

FIG. 13, 14.

'false' flashback will be discussed in the next chapter, for the moment, we will focus on their narrative status in terms of following and mapping: The entry into the sequences is marked by the gaze of Avner signaling a metonymic modulation shifting from external reality to the interiority of his experience. Yet, if seen in relation to their occurrence within the plot, the flashbacks could be read equally as metaphorical modulations, mirroring the development of Avner.

The first flashback takes place when Avner embarks on his mission flying from Israel to Switzerland. It begins with pictures of the Palestinian hijackers entering the flat of the Israeli team already known from the beginning of the movie. This time the scene expands, not into the media event this time, but into the breaking of Israeli resistance, the taking of hostages, and the killing of two Israeli men. The final scene ends with the second killing, shown in a panning shot that moves with the machine gun salvo from the shell-pierced body to the wall behind getting splattered red with blood (fig. 15).

From this outright image of massacre the flashback fades back into the present of Avner, who still is in the airplane. Apparently under

FIG. 15, 16, 17.

the impression of such 'shell shock'[5] he takes of his wedding ring and ultimately the mission begins (fig. 16).

The second flashback finds Avner in an entirely different situation. Meanwhile, the mission of his team progressed with the liquidation of several targets, yet reaching the point of stagnation and backlash. Their attempt to kill their most valuable target, Ali Hassan Salameh, failed and Avner calls his wife in New York from his hotel room in London. Hearing his daughter 'speak'[6] he covers his eyes. The flashback enters the Munich hijacking with a hard cut at the very moment when hijackers and hostages in the Olympic village transfer from the flat to the helicopters for further transit to the Fürstenfeldbruck airbase.[7] By following characters and actions no new information is revealed for the spectator, or put differently: Basically, the narrative progress gets delayed. We simply follow the group entering a bus, see the busses pass the reporters caught up in live coverage, exiting the bus and again entering, this time two helicopters. At first sight the action seems quite irrelevant, yet there is one particularly significant moment in the scene: While the hijackers are clearly marked as aggressors by their guns throughout the sequence, this impression is disturbed in the end. When entering the helicopter, a hostage stumbles, burying the now helpless hijacker under himself. Although the situation is quickly resolved and order is restored again, we are shown pictures of the aggressor rendered into a helpless terrified victim, virtually indistinctive from a hostage (fig. 17).

Exiting the flashback by a hard cut, we see Avner suddenly awake from this nightmarish impression. Minutes afterwards he has to realize that the first of his team members was killed by a hostile agent. And furthermore he comes to realize that he as likely could have been the victim himself. The relation between perpetrators and victims is shaken, both in the Avner's present and the remembered past.

The third flashback is the most complex one and marks Avner's final stage of development. After the mission has terminated without the accomplishment of all objectives, Avner resides in New York with his family, haunted by an almost paranoid fear for the safety of his family. The penultimate scene plays in the marital bed. In this structural counterpart of an earlier sex scene before the beginning of the mission Avner is distracted as his wife starts touching him. His gaze is constantly directed towards the off and never meets the eyeline of his wife until the flashback sets in when hijackers and hostages are at Fürstenfeldbruck airport. The latter ones are constrained by ropes and remain in the helicopters, while two of the hijackers inspect the provided escape plane. When realizing the attempt of trickery by the German police force an extended gunfight sets in, eventually leading to the killing of five of the eight hijackers and

all nine hostages. While the other hijacker sequences are closed off as following units, this last one is open to its narrative frame being intercut with the ongoing sex scene of Avner. The following pattern of the third flashback thus shows a constant modulation stressing the metaphorical relation between the acts of violence in (the past of) Fürstenfeldbruck and the (present) sexual act in New York, finally culminating in an excessive alternation of the explosion of one helicopter, Avner's orgasm, and a machine gun salvo killing the Jewish hostages in the second helicopter (figs. 3 and 4). The flashback ends with a hard cut and Avner rests his head on his wife's shoulder, the scene closing with a close-up of the hands intertwined, both of their wedding rings clearly visible. As Susanne Klein suggests, this seems to be a cathartic experience for Avner, allowing him peace in his family home—and enabling him to refuse further services for Israel as he does in the final scene in front of the Manhattan skyline (see also Klein 119) (fig. 2).

It should be noted that these sequences I have labeled as 'deviations' from the single focus narrative are integrated into the single focus framework insofar as they are Avner's mental images—a reading decisively suggested by the appropriated blending techniques. In contrast, or rather at the same time, they point at the narrative scheme of the dual focus narrative. According to Altman "[f]or a text to work in a dual-focus manner, it must establish a space (or series of spaces) and introduce two separate groups laying claim to that space" (91). Its following pattern is alternating between the oppositional groups preferably by "regular movements between the two sides by means of metaphoric modulation" (90). And the ensuing confrontation is framed by established value systems like law or tradition while the dual focus narrative tends towards "[n]egation of time through suspension, circularity, and spatialization" (90).

Although the alternation between the groups in *Munich* is rather asymmetrical by default since almost every scene involves Avner or his conscience, the motif of the claimed space permeates the film on several layers. Starting with the very core of the conflict, Palestine and Israel are described as opponents for the same land throughout the film, both with a similar rhetoric defining the land as "home." However, the actual confrontation hardly takes place in Israel or Gaza, but virtually everywhere in the global space.[8] As the film follows the retaliation operations it is moving predominantly across Europe, but also to the Middle East and to the United States. At the same time, several TV broadcasts that are depicted as variations of the initial media event at the Olympics signify that the global confrontation is not only physical, but also situated on the symbolic plain (fig. 18).

Thereby the opponents are bound together metaphorically in the vicious circle of violence, both potentially being perpetrators and victims—occasionally even at the same time (fig. 19).

In the logic of retaliation, time strives towards suspension and circularity—for that each victory triggers another defeat, and for that every killed terrorist quickly spawns a successor. A perspective vividly recalled by Ephraim in the final scene, when he compares the war on terror with the cutting of his unceasingly growing fingernails—while the New York Skyline forms the background. Last, and probably not least, the space under contestation is the space of memory. Given the prominence of the (false) flashback scenes that forcefully enter Avner's thoughts, the perception of the enemy—however fragile in its mediated and remembered instances—is repeatedly evoked as a guiding principle for present actions. Avner is only able to escape this conflict about his memory (and thus his identity) by shifting the symbolic grounds from

FIG. 18, 19.

the political to the private sphere. This being played out in the symbolic form of the sexual act is hardly accidental, since the sexual act is considered as common cultural symbol for the act of taking possession of land, especially in the framework of the double focus narrative (see Altman 78–84).

To make sense of the presence and confrontation of the two different narrative strategies, we might look at their roots in cultural history. According to Altman the double focus mode can be considered the older, more archaic model, also showing strong ties to Jewish history:

> For Jews, the Hebrew Bible ot Tanakh remains central to every aspect of religious life. The dual-focus tales of Exodus, Judges, Esther, and Maccabees all provide important models for a religion that depends heavily on a distinction between those who are within and those who are without. Just as these books tell stories of the separation of the world into Israelites and their foes, so Jewish life is heavily dependent on rituals that celebrate inclusion while threatening exile for the unfaithful—the ultimate punishment in a dual-focus system. Books of history, books of law, books of wisdom and prophecy—the Hebrew Bible contains a resolutely dual-focus model for daily life. (Altman 334)

In contrast, the single focus narrative is rather associated with modern market economies and the notion of individual development. Its logic does not derive from circular repetition of stable values, but rather from linear development on the basis of personal decisions that allows for the negotiation of values (334). From this perspective, the story told in *Munich* is a kind of nesting of the older narrative formula (the double focus) within the newer one (the single focus) —or put differently: An archaic formula within a modern formula. Spielberg's "prayer for peace" (Spielberg, as qtd. in Schickel 236) makes its rejection of the spiral violence—biblically speaking: an eye for an eye—plausible by nesting it into the rather modern template of psychological development. However, while the archaic dissolves, it does not disappear fully: The distant but gloomy World Trade Center hints at the both potential and actual return of the repressed archaic formula (fig. 2). Regardless of speculations about Spielberg's Jewish origin this nesting of narrative formulas can be considered to hint at the basic concept of history put forward by *Munich*: Despite modern man's conscience rooted in the ability to reflect upon himself and the morality of his deeds, he is unable to learn from history since the patterns of violent conflict are determined and recurring in nature. This interpretation is further substantiated by a closer look at the formal and aesthetic devices used to construct the narrative.

Cinematic Excess and Media Memory

As the analysis of the narrative strategies suggests, *Munich* is relying on the principles of confrontation. Confrontation is shaped on the level of character interaction, but also

in regards to its temporal structure, thereby producing the paradox of the 'false' flashback as Stephen Howe notes: "And if, as one supposes, the Munich scenes are supposed to be running through Avner's head, we're offered no reason why he should be so haunted. He wasn't there. Those scenes weren't even on TV. Why not any of the equally vicious incidents he's witnessed, or perpetrated, himself ?" Being a dreamlike vision on the one hand, but a kind of memory on the other, the scene is a reference to the instability of memory expressed by formal and stylistic means. Since the flashbacks are not entirely plausible in their relation to the past, they deliberately seem to surpass narrative consistency as already noted while observing the ambivalent relation between single focus and dual focus narrative.

Given this limitation of a merely narratological explanation the category of "style" has to be integrated into our analysis.[9] Leaving a deeper methodological discussion aside I am going to refer to style in the sense of neoformalist film theory, most prominently associated with David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. Generally speaking, style results from the repeated use of certain filmic techniques, which usually tend to be camouflaged through narrative motivation—at least in classical Hollywood cinema (Thompson 488). The foregrounding of filmic techniques (or devices) then could be termed "excess," as Kristin Thompson suggests:

> Style is the use of repeated techniques which become characteristic of the work; these techniques are foregrounded so that the spectator will notice them and create connections between their individual uses. Excess does not equal style, but the two are closely linked because they both involve the material aspects of the film. Excess forms no specific patterns which we could say are characteristic of the work. But the formal organization provided by style does not exhaust the material of the filmic techniques, and a spectator's attention to style might well lead to a noticing of excess as well. (489)

In *Munich*, two particular devices reveal the tension between style and excess as they linger on the thin line between the unifying and the disunifying structures of the film,[10] and both are associated with the narrative conflict. The first device is the series of (false) flashbacks presenting the Munich massacre as a template for Avner's personal development. Since its recap to the past cannot be explained by Avner's perspective alone, it is intrinsically linked to the second device, which could be termed 'media reflection,' referring to the strategic use of the television medium in the filmic representation.

Since *Munich*'s initial encounter with the massacre as a media event is highlighting the role of television as an actor within the event, the analysis starts with an examination of the film's strategy of 'media reflection' before turning back to the flashback. In his Essay "Zwischen Selbstreflexivität und Selbstreferentialität" (Between self-reflexivity and self-referentiality) German film theorist Kay Kirchmann suggests the concept of self-reflexivity for the self-portrayal of the medium film within films: To show itself, film has to account for its own status (68). However, this status is not clearly defined, because like any other medium film can be defined by very different constituents. Always according to the actual definition employed it might be seen either as aesthetic product, mass medium, communication device, perceptional matrix, sign system, commodity, or instrument of propaganda. Thus, if "a self-reflexive film addresses one or more of its constituents" (68), it has different options to reflect about itself as a medium. Drawing on this concept of filmic self-reflexivity, I suggest its adaptation

to the filmic portrayal of other media, for instance the filmic reflection of television as seen in *Munich*. This 'media reflection' is predominantly shaped in the montage of the television event at the beginning, but also on three other occasions throughout the film: The continuous motif being its coupling to coverage about terrorist action.

The initial event scene, which by far is the most complex and elaborated reflection, functions as a template for the later ones, which basically operate on evoking the cues presented earlier. As argued above—in the analysis of film's beginning—the montage draws together all actors in the scheme of the terrorist event. Perpetrators, victims, police forces, political actors, and audiences are rendered equal as spectators and observers—not only of the event in Munich, but also of the way television constructs the event (fig. 10). Repeatedly and in quick successions shot and reverse shot combinations mark the relation between the spectators and the television screen (fig. 20 and fig. 21), establishing the status of the mass medium: All individual spectators see the same pictures of the event, thus becoming a unified mass audience despite their geographical separation.

The staging of a (global) mass audience also indicates the permeation of society by television: The television screen becomes the center of public attention (fig. 22) as well as the center of the private homes; Israeli and Palestinian communities alike gather around the screen to follow the event (fig. 23), and even the (Israeli) politicians and the military join in (fig. 20), not having a privileged perception in comparison to the 'normal' people.

A constant emphasis is placed on the emotional impact of the television broadcast, defining the medium over its affective impact: From the cheering Palestinians[11] at the beginning of the event, over the crying and mourning relatives

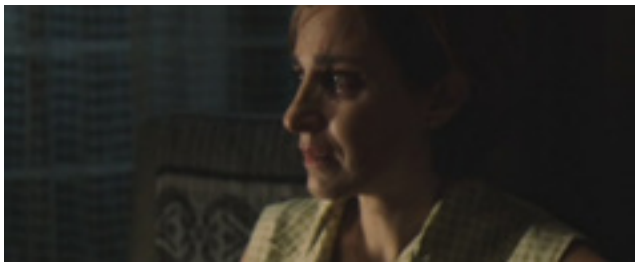

FIG. 20, 21, 22, 23, 24.

(fig. 24) of both the hostages and the hijackers in the turmoil of events, onto Avner Kauffman, shown as a devout spectator-participant of the memorial ceremony (fig. 12).

Munich goes even further, suggesting that the 'window on the world' allows—and maybe

even forces—communities not only to observe real events, but to participate emotionally. In its shockingly real character, the violent event gains a quite hypnotic quality, clearly signified by the recurrent close-ups of the spectators with their eyes fixated on the television screen. In this sense, the spectators shown in *Munich* are rather helpless victims of the violent intrusion of the medium into their homes: Their perception is firmly defined by the confinements of the television screen which inevitably tends to overwhelm. While this procedure is also repeated for the spectator of the film *Munich*, he is granted the privilege to step back and reflect on occasion. Central to this is the exposition of the production infrastructure of television, showing the studio, the cameras, and the reporters involved in the performance of the media event (fig. 25).

However, the pictures the film spectator dives into when the film cuts into the broadcast do not have the same fictional status as the rest of the film, but are historical file footage from the media event itself. Thus the reality effect of the event is reproduced in the film as a movement from the distanced spectator, who sees television as another nested frame within the film frame, to the involved and participating spectator when the camera moves into the screens, dissolving their boundaries and making the historical pictures fill the whole screen (fig. 26).

In sum, television is portrayed as an actor within the framework of the terrorist event—and moreover even portrayed as the framework itself. In the course of the film, this principle is evoked three more times, always forcing the attention of Avner and his teammates towards the screen. At these occasions they learn about the actions of their supposed opponents and feel the compulsion to react on it. In the first instance, they observe a successful airplane hijacking, grimly declaring the Palestinian hijackers "movie stars." In the second instance, it is a bomb attack in succession of their second

FIG. 25, 26, 27, 28.

killing mission, leading them to the conclusion: "They are talking to us. We're in dialogue now." The third and last instance of television reflection takes place when Avner is meeting with Louis, the French informant, showing another bomb attack—while the television is mainly presented in the background (fig. 27) it abruptly gains importance when we see the screen violence in close-up (fig. 28).

Notably the editing echoes the shock-like intrusion of the media event in the first instance. Notably, the presence of television gets weaker in the course of the film—they only

take place before Avner's second flashback, thus being only intertwined with his actions in the phase of the successful operations, but not in the phase of their gradually failing mission.

The structure of the other device, the flashbacks, seems to be of a different kind, though clearly related to the 'media reflection.' As indicated above, their status is ambivalent in relation to the historical reality of the diegesis: Firstly, the initial sequence—following the title "inspired by real events" —is depicted in the aesthetics of the later flashbacks, thus suggesting that we enter the diegetic reality of the film. Only later on, after experiencing the flashbacks in Avner's imagination, the status of this reality can be questioned. In this sense, the spectator is thrown into twofold uncertainty, as they is not only forced to negotiate the 'real' against the perception of the media event, but also against the mixture of memory and imagination in Avner's flashback. Furthermore, the filmic device of the flashback itself adds to the uncertainty. According to Maureen Cheryn Turim's seminal work *Flashbacks in Film*, the flashback is "a privileged moment in unfolding that juxtaposes different moments of temporal reference" (1), thereby creating an intrinsic link between subjective memory and objective history: "[…] flashbacks in film often merge the two modes of remembering the past, giving large-scale social and political history the subjective mode of a single, fictional individual's remembered experience" (2). Likewise in Avner's case the frame of remembering is clearly linked to the individual, tainted with the possibility of failure and distortion—yet its factual content not negotiable since we learnt about the death of the hostages (and hijackers alike) through television. In this sense the spectator again is made aware of the unreliability of the representation, as they experiences different modes of historical representation, which all have their inherent deficiencies in claiming the truth. Regarding the initial sequence the spectator is even turned into a test subject as they is first made to believe the sequence being the event as history, only to learn later on that its reliability might be flawed.

But the implications of using the flashback in framing Avner's memory could extend well beyond the question of historical objectivity when projected on the shape of history in general:

> Many flashback narrations contain an element of philosophical fatalism, coupled with psychoanalytic fatalism […]. This fatalism presents a cynical view of history cyclical, guaranteed to repeat that which we have already seen; the release from the repetitions inherent in history is then forged in a singular solution that serves a prevailing ideology, such as patriotic identifications or a retreat into the 'personal' as a microcosmic, idealized world. (18)

The template of *Munich* seems to shine through Turim's lines when considering the flashback structure: The first flashback initiates Avner's mission by repeating the beginning assault in the Olympic village. Interestingly, the first severe injury explicitly exposed for the camera is a gunshot through both cheeks, leaving a blood-leaking wound in the face of the athlete (fig. 29), followed by a zoom to close-up and a deadlock of eyelines between shooter and victim, the victim covering the wound with his hand (fig. 30).

Then the musical score is increasingly dominating the diegetic noise of the sequence, even silencing the final machinegun salvo, while the deadly actions are stretched significantly through the use of slow motion. Time is virtually suspended when the blood stained wall is fading into the red morning sky (fig. 15) and the interlude ends with Avner taking off his wedding ring (fig. 16). In relation to the first scene of the film, the

flashback fills an ellipsis: While violence was mostly spared during television coverage of the event, Avner's vision portrays it in very explicit and highly dramatic form. A striking allegory for the return of something repressed; and put differently: the result of a trauma, the Greek word with the meaning of "wound" or "injury" (see Eggers 602). Hardly surprising, its definition in terms of psychoanalysis and cultural trauma theory reads like the character profile of Avner Kauffman, according to Wulf Kantsteiner:

> […] the trauma victim exists in a state of temporal limbo caught between a destructive event that did not register at the moment of its occurrence, and the belated symptoms that unconsciously and obsessively repeat the injury to the person's protective shield without adding to the victim's understanding of her own fate. (203)

According to Eggers the repetition of the injury can surface in the various forms, most commonly however as flashbacks, hallucinations, and compulsive actions (see Eggers 602). Furthermore, traumatic memories return unintentionally and elude their verbal recounting. In *Munich*, the impossibility of recounting spreads from the first flashback onwards: While the image of the face wound symbolizes the inability of speaking (figs. 29 and 30), the whole scene virtually lacks the layer of verbal communication and is generally of little information density for the progress of the narration. The slow motion might be justified by its dream framing, but also lacks an overarching narrative motivation, thus rather foregrounding itself as a form of cinematic excess. Such correspondence of form and content is perpetuated throughout the following flashbacks, both seeing similar appropriations of slow motion, musical score, and the lack of communication, thus shaping a perception of the event that differs considerably from the precedent television coverage. As analyzed in the previous chapter

FIG. 29, 30.

they keep paralleling Avner's development, as his fellow agents, like the Munich hijackers, increasingly become victimized themselves, although they keep on perpetrating violence themselves.

In the third flashback, the montage of gunfight, explosion, and intercourse, radicalizes the self-sufficient elements, above all the muzzle flashes of the machineguns (fig. 3), which represent not only a mise-en-abyme of the concept of flashback itself, but then figure even as an imprint on Avner's orgasmic body (fig. 31).

Thereby not only the time layers of past and present are vigorously intertwined, but cinematic excess also leaves Avner's imagination and reveals its impact on his reality. Eventually, the third flashback is indeed framed as a "release […] forged in a singular solution that serves a prevailing ideology, such as patriotic identifications or a retreat into the 'personal' as a microcosmic, idealized world" (Turim 18): Hands intertwined with his wife, we see two wedding rings in close-up, one of them being of course the one taken off in close-up when Avner started on his mission (fig. 32). The microscopic, idealized world, after all, is the family.

FIG. 31, 32.

Reel Memories?

The endeavor of this article was to highlight the narrative structure and the formal shape of *Munich*, looking for its strategies of creating meaning beyond the extent of naturalized representation und character motivation. By analyzing two particular techniques, which frame the center of the film's narrative dynamic and which manifest decisive choices of the director in contrast to its precursors on the subject matter, the importance of such strategies could be shown. In this light, the story of the Israeli counter-terrorist team on its retaliation mission after the Munich massacre is not so much about the specific political scenario of the Middle Eastern conflict, but rather about the mechanism of mediated terrorism and its traumatic effects.

Of course no one questioned that the film was meant to be an allegory for 9/11 and its aftermath as much as it was meant to be a historical drama. But while character psychology primarily draws on the concept of identity in relation to culturally defined notions of community (here mostly equating Israel with the USA and Black September with Al Qaida), the analysis presented rather points at the question of mediation: The film avoids to explicate the initial violence of the film, thus blurring the categories of perception from the very beginning. Subsequently, the event exists for Avner (and the spectator alike) only as television images and in his imagination. Although *Munich* does definitely not deny the reality of violence, there is sort of a reality gap when trying to grasp the actual event behind the cold surface of the television screen. Though television is able to show glimpses of the victims and the hijackers in the course of the event, it eventually does not show them until they are dead and rendered stars of the next media events: The memorial service on the one hand and the man hunt on the other. In this sense, television is presented unable to reflect about the events, and more so, even unable to recap on them as every following instance of television is determined to reproduce the spiral of violence.

In contrast, the stage for the reflection of violence is set clearly in the flashbacks, although the reflection is not accomplished by conscious evaluation but rather literal reflections of the violence most concisely depicted in the flashes of gunfire and the overtly iconic bloodshed. Within the interpretative frame of trauma theory this concurs with the idea of 'working through' the trauma to establish a sense of meaning (and identity) again after a shattering experience (see e.g. Kantsteiner 215). Historically notable, even the psychological concept of "flashback" only came into existence after the proliferation of the filmic technique (see Turim 5). In this sense, the film portrays television as a medium without the capability of memory or reflection, and contrasts it with a genuinely filmic mode of memory that serves to "work through" the trauma. Although Avner cannot overcome the problem of false memory he reaches his personal solution—and in doing so he reproduces the films bigger scheme: His fiction, inspired by something real and traumatic, seems to help him escape the spiral of violence. Spielberg's film thus is

maybe not so much a "prayer for peace", but better described as a—very graphic—therapy session.

If the therapy was successful for Avner, why isn't he granted an unambiguous happy end? The political answer was given by Ephraim in the last scene, when he describes the ongoing growing of his fingernails: (Arab) terrorism is going to continue from Munich to New York and possibly onwards. However, the answer of trauma theory is different: Because the repressed is about to return, maybe unintentionally, but most certainly with violent force. Sticking so close to such interpretative framework of trauma *Munich* is exemplary for the concept's intellectual boom—and at the same time is equally exemplary for the problems associated with it: Kantsteiner notes that "[t]he trope of trauma has become a comforting fiction of continuity" (215) and that it "excludes the possibility of radical discontinuity and indifference in the aftermath of historical catastrophe, and in this sense represents just another self-centered academic fiction" (215). Against the background of this verdict we could ponder which choices Spielberg had when telling the history of the Munich massacre and its aftermath—and whether it would have made sense to irritate our sense of historical continuity. Eventually, the answer might be located in the pragmatics of the filmic medium: As long as television can be regarded as the primary mode of shaping history as a continuous and utterly oblivious flow, the stage is set for films to construct reflective stances towards memory and history. In doing so, however, they cannot overcome the implicit assumptions of their stylistic language and compulsively turn every 'real event' into a 'reel event.'

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Image Notes

All images are screenshots from *Munich*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Universal Studios, Dreamworks, 2005. DVD.

Figure 1: Title "Inspired by real events"

Figure 2: Final shot showing the skyline of New York including the Twin Towers

Figure 3: Palestinian hijacker shooting with a machine gun

Figure 4: Avner Kauffman's climax intercut with the gunfight at Fürstenfeldbruck airfield

Figure 5: Avner hesitates before he triggers the bomb

Figure 6: Avner awaking from a nightmare

Figure 7: Team discussion

Figure 8: The hijackers climbing the fence of the Olympic village

Figure 9: The beginning of the assault

Figure 10: TV control room

Figure 11: The hijackers watching themselves

Figure 12: Avner watching the event

Figure 13: Names and pictures of the victims on TV

Figure 14: Names and pictures of the organizers in the Mossad headquarters

Figure 15: Fading from the first flashback back to reality again

Figure 16: Avner takes of his wedding ring at the beginning of the mission

Figure 17: Stumbling hijacker looking terrified

Figure 18: The team focused on the TV during further terrorism coverage

Figure 19: Stalemate between the Israeli and Palestinian team

Figure 20: Intelligence/military officials watching the TV event

Figure 21: Reverse shot showing BBC anchor Peter Jenning on screen

Figure 22: Public viewing in Israel (location indicated by the subtitles on the screen in an adjacent shot)

Figure 23: Cheering Palestinians during public viewing

Figure 24: Crying spectator

Figure 25: Reporters on location with cameras rolling

Figure 26: Reporter on the television screen

Figure 27: Avner talking to his informant Louis, TV running in the background

Figure 28: Close-up of the television screen adjacent to Avner's conversation with the informant

Figure 29: Israeli athlete after being shot in the face

Figure 30: Israeli athlete covering his cheek wound

Figure 31: Imprint of the muzzle-flash on Avner's orgasmic body

Figure 32: Avner and his wife. Hands intertwined with wedding rings.

(Endnotes)

1. The article by Michelle Goldberg serves also as a concise over the politically motivated debate over *Munich* in December 2005 and January 2006.

2. This is not an awkward choice since Islamist terrorism carried out by Al Qaida gains much of its motivation from the Middle Eastern conflict between Palestine and Israel, as the speeches of Osama bin Ladin suggest (see Kepel, Milelli). On the other hand, one decisive difference between *Black September* in the 1970s and *Al Qaida* is their spiritual foundation—the latter based on religious beliefs, while the former is resting on merely political grounds (see Klein 92–93).

3. The example presented by Altman for the hyperbolic are the Grail stories, whose single episodes show no explicit interrelation beyond their formal coexistence; another way of understanding the concept might be the surrealist mode of montage thriving "on the unexpected, the apparently unconnected" (Altman 26).

4. The succession and the layers of the montage do not allow for a definitive segmentation into different locations and actors. However, this is not the primary concern as the decisive observation is the occurrence of the high number modulations between following-units that creates the whole part.

5. The term refers to the battle trauma of soldiers explained by Aleida Assmann in her seminal work *Erinnerungsräume* (Memory Spaces, 278).

6. She is still too young to speak proper, she rather makes baby noises.

7. The hijackers pressed the German government for airborne transit to Egypt, while German forces prepared for a raid at the army airbase.

8. Notabene: This is referring to the representation of the film, since there is no doubt whatsoever about the very physical conflict in the Middle East over decades now.

9. Notably this already happened implicitly, for instance when montage patterns were explained during the narratological analysis.

10. For a detailed discussion of the relation between "unifying" and "disunifying" elements also see Kristin Thompson's "The Concept of Cinematic Excess" (489–91).

11. This particular snippet recalls the CNN footage on September 11 2001 showing cheering crowds in the streets of Gaza.

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