

“War on Terror”: The Limitation of Representation of the Film

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Abstract: History was always written by the winners. Despite the fact that the history of the *War on Terror* is relatively new, Hollywood is quick to develop a visual history of the conflict. Hollywood’s excellent realism aesthetics were successful in justifying the goal and method of the “war on terror,” interrupting ongoing reality to influence and reconstruct public memory about what happened. This dissertation will use three awarded and influential case studies: *The Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty* and *American Sniper* to demonstrate the fragmentation of film representation, that the film only speaks for “us.” The dissertation aims to uncover the hidden political unawareness behind film representations, the manner in which those films provide limited versions of what happened, and how the films emphasise the self-subjectivity while objectifying the other.

Keywords: Post-colonialism; War on terror; American exceptionalism; Orientalism; Film representation

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1. The Self

In visual representations of the “war on terror,” the American hero is represented both as a figure of overcoming national wounds and loss also as a protective barrier against the barbaric other. This part decodes the ways in which the films construct the white superior heroes who are brave, patriotic and humanitarian. Furthermore, demonstrated the different processes of how the audiences identify, align and sympathise with the heroes in those three films.

1.1. Empowered subjectivity in *The Hurt Locker*

The Hurt Locker focuses on an explosive ordnance disposal team’s daily missions in Iraq during the wartime. The team consists of three members, staff sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner), sergeant JT Sanborn (Anthony Mackie) and specialist Owen Eldridge (Brian Geraghty). This part of the essay will argue that *The Hurt Locker* portray an ambivalent protagonist whose subjectivity is embodied through in-depth character depiction. It portrays the protagonist James as an archetypal masculine hero who is both brave, taciturn and skilful, as well as emotionally incompetent, reckless and traumatised. Through emphasising James’ subjectivity, the film only enables the audiences to align with him through its narrative and immersive cinematic aesthetics.

1.2. *Zero Dark Thirty* and American exceptionalism

Shirin S. Deylami writes that “America’s “war on terror” is written about and seen through the eyes of men and where heroes that fight terror are men”^[1]. *Zero Dark Thirty* partially contradicts^[1] the argument, it closely associates the concept of freedom, democracy and global security with female empowerment. In this part

of the essay, the author argues that the film portrays American exceptionalism through establishing a linear relationship between the feminist protagonist Maya (Jessica Chastain) and the issue of global security.

In contrast to other films discussed in this dissertation, *Zero Dark Thirty* is a different kind of war film which does not focus on the soldiers and battlefield. It establishes itself as the truthful and authentic story behind the killing of Osama Bin Laden ^[2]. As it declares in the opening text, “the following motion picture is based on first-hand accounts of actual events.” The film intentionally intercuts a large amount of public primary material including television news reports throughout Maya’s investigation process. It not only demonstrates its reliability but also shows that the female protagonist actively takes part in those important events.

1.3. *American Sniper* and portraying the war to a state of forced violence

The film *American Sniper* was based on Chris Kyle’s (1974-2013, played by Bradley Cooper in the film) autobiography *American Sniper* (2012). Julien Pomarede introduces that American media stages Kyle as “the most lethal sniper in US military history,” and he was accredited officially with 160 confirmed kills, but he estimated the number at 255 ^[3]. Before the adaptation *American Sniper* became a blockbuster film, the book had already sold more than a million copies and been recognised as an accurate reflection of Kyle’s life. Therefore, the film has a great reputation for authentically portraying American soldiers’ experience at the war, a real story of a sniper on front lines. The nature of the film somewhat makes sure that the audiences are able to fully invest in the story emotionally.

2. The Other

In the introduction to *Orientalism* (1978), Edward W. Said’s states that “Orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying ‘us’ European as against all ‘those’ non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all non-European peoples and cultures. There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness, usually overriding the possibility that a more independent, or more sceptical, thinker might have had different views on the matter.” Its’ argument is true to the “*war on terror*” films, that the films provide stereotypical and racist presentations on Arabs and Muslims for emphasising the superiority of America or the West. There are several influential works already published on this subject, such as Martin Barker’s *A Toxic Genre: The Iraq War Film* (2011) and Evelyn Alsultany’s *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (2012). This part of the dissertation intends to avoid the repetition of the Orientalist readings on barbaric and animalistic character depictions. It underlines the political unconsciousness and the process of stereotyping, to reveal the films’ intention of creating a biased history that America is civilised and developed whereas the Middle East is wasted and backward for legitimating the US military actions during the “*war on terror*”.

2.1. *The Hurt Locker* and comparing the other to the bomb

The Hurt Locker takes a different approach to the “war on terror,” it merely focuses on a bomb disposal team whose job is defusing the bomb rather than killing the other like other kinds of soldiers. This part argues that the film dehumanises the other, it shares that the American soldiers’ paranoia that every Iraqi is potentially a terrorist though depicting the gaze of the other, with the hero getting closer to the local Iraqi, it reassures the dangerousness of the other by comparing the other to the bomb.

The Hurt Locker sets in Baghdad, Iraq, but as Bruce Bennet and Bulent Diken argue that the film is not explicitly historically specific or localised, and “Baghdad is imagined and rendered here as a space in

which the distinction between the social and the political does not hold ^[4].” They further develop the argument that contemporary “American military actions have practically unlimited legitimacy to target the barbarians and their rogue states,” which are expected to absorb every kind of violence. The film does not tend to establish the exact location since the opening sequence, but it depicts a lawless and uncivilised space full of barbarian Iraqis and every one of them looks like a potential terrorist regardless of one’s gender and age.

2.2. *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Military Orientalism*

In *Torture, Sex and Military Orientalism*, with the bases of Said’s *Orientalism*, Patricia Owens defines *Military Orientalism* that it “identifies a linkage between Western military strategies in the non-European world and constructions of Western identity.” She further explains “the assumed superiority of the West is placed at risk in battles against supposedly inferior, irrational, weak, and uncivilised opponents. When these opponents fail to be defeated as expected, there are cultural as well as political and military consequences ^[5].” The argument to some extent unfolds the motivation and logic of presenting American military torture in *Zero Dark Thirty*. Firstly, the film presents orientalist imagination that the superior and just westerns are performing their duty of punishing the great evil because of their great power. Whereas the Orientals fail in fulfilling their imaginative doomed fate, that they are cunning, stubborn and hard to locate. Then the film triggers the hateful emotions towards the Orientals to demonstrate the urgency of cultural, political and military action.

Zero Dark Thirty narrows the representation on the other that the film merely focuses on the Muslim terrorists arrested or wanted by the state, therefore, there is no natural or rational oriental in the film. The most extreme way the film used to objectify the other is that there are countless black and white photography of Middle East terrorists pinned on the walls of many CIA offices. Besides, they also appear in Maya’s low quality interrogation videos shot at unknown black sites. The film only constructs radical Orientals as what they should be like in the western imagination and presents them as visual and imminent threats to American nation.

2.3. *American Sniper* and the emptiness of the other

American Sniper is a conventional mainstream war film which the narrative of one hero protecting or saving his fellow soldiers, and aesthetics of realistic combat depiction are commonly seen in World War II and the Vietnam War combat films. Similar to traditional war films, *American Sniper*’s construction of the other, the Iraqi, is weak and flat. For stereotyping and alienate the other, the film never attempts to represent or understand the actions of the other for creating a sense that they are guilty, evil and inferior and their beliefs are irrational, dull and cruel. The image of the other is largely reduced to a symbol of total evil, its cores seem empty and meaningless.

Kyle uses limited vocabularies to describe the other that they are “uttermost savages,” “evil,” “bad guy” and “wolf.” Near the opening of the film, Kyle’s father lectures his children that there are only three types of people in the world, “wolves,” “sheep” and “sheepdog.” The implication of this worldview is very apparent and Giroux summaries that “wolves are brutal killers who threaten an innocent public,” “they can be found in Yemen, Afghanistan, and Iraq, or wherever Muslims live.” As for “sheep,” they are “a metaphor for God-loving, patriotic, innocent Americans,” then the sheepdogs can present “those patriotic and vigilant Americans whose role is to protect the sheep from the wolves” which include everyone who inhabits the warrior culture and “extend from the paramilitary police forces and vigilante super-patriots along the nation’s borders to the gun-loving soldiers that protect American interests overseas” (2016, p208) ^[6].

3. Conclusion

The dissertation started with stressing the importance of visibility of the event of “war on terror.” Then it mapped out the ways in which Hollywood war cinema shapes American national identity through Guy Westwell’s argument ^[7]. The introduction pointed out the fragmentation of the film representation of the “war on terror” that it lacks imagery unity of home front and lack a coherent historical narrative. Then the introduction clarified that the dissertation is going to explore Hollywood’s narrative of the “war on terror.” Hollywood represents the Americans as the superior self who have absolute morality, subjectivity and humanity, whereas the image of the other is largely narrowed. The enemy is the other who is brutal, savage and uncivilised.

The first heading focused on the image of the self and the second heading closely read the depiction of the other. The structure of the dissertation means to draw comparisons between the representation of the self and the other to demonstrate that through Hollywood’s masterful aesthetics of realism, the “war on terror” films shape the ongoing history. The films create a bias history which prioritises American moral, humanitarian and military superiority through objectifying and dehumanising the other.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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