
Imagine the Terror

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The monstrosities that took place on September 11 must be condemned unequivocally. There is no apology possible that would excuse the perpetrators, and we must hope those who still live will be brought to justice. But if we are to prevent such atrocities in the future, we cannot rest with condemnations and swift verdicts. We must seek a collective understanding of this atrocious act within its political, historical, and popular contexts. At the juncture of these contexts is a tension that I wish to explore here: the tension between the reality of recent political history in the Middle East, where I grew up, and the image of the Middle East in the popular imagination in America. Let me start with Hollywood.

Perhaps I seem untoward in advancing a connection between popular imagination and the political realities that contextualized the most egregious terrorist attack the United States has ever experienced. But consider: among the most pronounced reactions to the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States was the degree to which press and public alike said that the events “looked like a movie.” The images of those airplanes slicing the twin towers of the World Trade Center and their implosion looked too fantastic to be real. There are, of course, good reasons that Hollywood images resonate with the horrors of September 11 in the public imagination. New York City has been a favorite disaster site for Hollywood. In contemporary films such as *Godzilla*, *Armageddon*, and *Deep Impact*, Manhattan was the stage for disaster and mayhem. Quite recently in *The Siege*, major Manhattan landmarks were blown to pieces by a group of Arab terrorists. The image of New York City buildings imploding has enough fictional credibility to have framed the reality of September 11 for many of us.

I wish to consider the possibility that the terrorists knew and deployed these cinematic images with frightening efficacy. The “symbolism” involved in their work shows how well they had mastered the power of the image. Is it possible that these terrorists appropriated Hollywood’s disaster blockbuster? One critic suggested that the terrorists illustrated they could “out-

Hollywood Hollywood." In this sense, geopolitical and cultural worlds came together on September 11 in a lethal and monstrous moment of blockbuster imagination.

What complicates the relationship between the cinematic and the real is the mediation of the televisual. In the eyewitness coverage of the horrors of the World Trade Center's destruction, the conscience of television, as Avital Ronell once put it, operated through the auspices of video. One film critic wondered whether the television networks aired the disaster scene in a wider view in order to avoid showing people waving for help in the windows of the massive buildings or jumping out of the windows. Was this all too real for network television obsessed with "reality-based" television?

The relentless mediatization of the events of September 11 as an American phenomenon charts two directions for further discussion: the extent to which the American experience of the geopolitical is constructed through the cinematic and the mediation of the geopolitical by the televisual. On the one hand, there has been a proliferation of narratives of the Middle East in popular culture after the cold war. On the other hand, the American experience of recent conflicts has been highly mediatized (e.g., the Gulf War, Kosovo). The televisualization of international relations, the so-called CNN effect, is another element of this American phenomenon. And there is more: the shrinking public sphere, the erosion of formal politics, a notoriously ill-informed and internationally insulated population, and a journalism driven by ratings and fixated on the private (Monica Lewinsky and Gary Condit sagas as reality-based television). One begins to see why, in America, the geopolitical coordinates are lost in favor of the cinematic and the televisual.

A brief look at post-cold war Hollywood's Middle East reveals the contours of the interpretive framework provided by Hollywood for the geopolitical world and its synergistic relationship to the rhetoric of U.S. foreign policy. After a period of détente and "peaceful coexistence" with the Soviets, America was perceived as a "weakened superpower." Signs of this weakness were seen in the presidency of Jimmy Carter ("soft" on communists), the "loss" of Nicaragua and Iran, the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, the hostage crisis in Iran, and Carter's preoccupation with human rights. Ronald Reagan's "resurgent America" was the 1980s response. This was a call for the projection of American power around the globe. Aggressive militarism and a host of foreign interventions ensued. In that political-cultural context, "terrorism" and its current cultural figurations emerged as potent ideological signifiers of the era. It was designated as "Russia's secret weapon." There was a call to fight the evil empire. Mujahedin in Afghanistan, including Osama bin Laden, were recruited and hailed as "freedom fighters."

Hollywood responded to Reagan's call by producing a series of films depicting resurgent America (e.g., *Top Gun*). Another series of films in the

1980s involved invasion and rescue scenarios set in the Middle East (*Iron Eagle*, *Delta Force*). During the 1990s, Hollywood remained preoccupied with terrorism. However, the end of the Reagan era and its aggressive foreign policy and the conclusion of the cold war ushered in a new “kinder, gentler” sensibility in the cultural depiction of terrorism. In *True Lies* (1994), “family values” rhetoric was incorporated in a sitcom caricature that turned the whole family into terrorist-killing heroes. *Executive Decision* (1996) reflected the “kinder, gentler” sensibility by developing a self-reflexive stance in its depiction of the Middle Eastern terrorists. *The Siege* (1998) embodied the 1990s multicultural liberal and “politically correct” sensibility in the way it at once deployed the conventions of depicting the Middle East and apologized for doing so.

The Siege deserves closer examination for the way it explicitly addressed Middle East politics, U.S. foreign policy, and the cultural anxieties about America’s relationship with the Middle East. *The Siege* was released in 1998, a decade after the Reagan presidency and in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing. Given this historical framework, it was in a position to tap into the political and cultural anxieties of the post-Reagan era and the political currents during the Clinton presidency. Although it is admittedly a run-of-the mill thriller, *The Siege* may have unwittingly anticipated some of the political issues we now face with regard to the Middle East crisis. Its plot departs from other terrorist films of the decade in that its “Arab” terrorists were actually trained by the CIA. Samir, the leader of the active terrorist cell in New York City, is a Palestinian character with whose help the CIA had been recruiting fighters to overthrow Saddam Hussein’s government. Because of a “policy shift,” reminiscent of George Bush’s abandonment of anti-Saddam forces at the end of the Gulf War, the fighters were left on their own for Saddam to slaughter. Some of them survived and are now here in New York City “doing what CIA taught them to do,” which is to make bombs and so on. The film also tries to give terrorists political grievances (e.g., Palestinians “seduce you with their suffering”). The film’s sympathetic portrayal of Samir’s predicaments depicts terrorists as the victims of their own circumstances. Embodying the sensibility of the 1990s, the film portrays terrorists who play the role of the victim as “good terrorists” and those who refuse to play the role as “bad terrorists.”

The Siege as a piece of pop culture (even if it is caught up in Orientalist visions) is redeemed by the way it raises critical questions, in sharp contrast to much mindless militarized discussion of terrorism in the press in the aftermath of September 11. It taps into anxieties about our actions in the Middle East, expressing fears that, as Mohiaddin Mesbahi put it, we Americans can no longer pretend to live in a bubble—removed from our actions and policies overseas. The advantage of addressing the political context of terrorism is that it gives us a proper historical perspective, as opposed to the

comfortable and feel-good talk about the “clash of civilizations” (or what Edward Said has called “the clash of ignorance”). Its good terrorist/bad terrorist dichotomy raises questions about our relationship with our “allies” (“good Muslims”) and our “enemies” (“bad Muslims”).

How are we to understand the notion of “good terrorists” as victims? The contemporary universalization of the narratives of victimization, as Slavoj Žižek would say, achieves two objectives. On one hand, compassion with the local victims of the third world frames the liberal-democratic (mis)conception of today’s great divide between those who are with “us” or those who are with “them.” On the other hand, victimization of the liberal-democratic subjects renders the Third World Other a threat.

It is here that the figure of “the Muslim” becomes crucial in the cultural-political discourse of the “West.” Today, the Taliban cave dweller perfectly and conveniently embodies the image of the Muslim as premodern and backward. If there is anything haunting “Western civilization,” it is the specter of “Islamism.” The spectral nature of this phenomenon, as Bobby Sayyid argues, stems from the manner in which the Muslim presence in the eyes of the West has tended to be grounded in a “hauntology” that easily conflates Muslims and ghosts (Jacques Derrida once said that the future belongs to ghosts and that modern image technology only increases the power of ghosts.). Does this not explain the difficulty in finding and punishing the enemy in Afghanistan? You cannot kill a ghost, not with daisy cutter bombs (the largest conventional bombs ever made being dropped on Afghanistan), not with cluster bombs, and not even with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

More important, the figure of the Muslim is a symptom of the new world order. “The international community” does not exist (the “impossibility of society,” in Ernesto Laclau’s language), and the Muslim is its symptom. The internal negativity, the immanent social antagonism in the midst of the “community,” is projected onto the figure of the Muslim. In other words, the West is fighting its own demons in the Middle East. Incidentally, Žižek saw the war against Slobodan Milosevic in these same terms.

“Why do they hate us?” became the burning question after September 11. The mirror image of the innocence inherent in that question was the simple answer “They hate us because we are the shining beacon of democracy.” And the mirror image is always bound up with blinding narcissism. Although I now live in America, I continue to visit the Middle East. I have yet to meet anyone who “hates” America because of the freedom its citizens enjoy. Allow me to be autobiographical for a moment, not to express longing for narcissistic narratives of victimization, but to speak from the position of an embodied experience of American Middle Eastern policies. As a seventeen-year old I lost many of my friends during the Iranian revolution that ousted the Shah’s brutal regime. In America, the Shah was depicted as

a “moderate” monarch and an “ally.” American had no “clash of civilizations” with the Shah. When Saddam Hussein entered into a war with Iran after the revolution, the United States supported him. Millions of Iranians, including many families I know, experienced the war firsthand. The United States supported Saddam Hussein and had no “clash of civilizations” with him. As someone who now lives in America, I am convinced that they do not hate us because we have freedom. They resent our policies that deprive them of their freedom when we support repressive regimes.

Recently, President George W. Bush pronounced that things would be better if the United States could explain itself to the people of the Middle East. Apparently, he thinks the crisis in the Middle East is a PR problem. This explains why recently Charlotte Beers, a former advertising guru known as “the queen of branding,” was appointed as undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs. It was reported that her task is to create an “ad campaign” with the aim of “pitching” American views to “young Muslims” in the Middle East. Contrary to the racist belief rampant in the media that people in the Middle East respond emotionally to images, they are savvy critics of image mongering. If the current U.S. propaganda of images fails to resonate with them, it is because they live the realities the images tend to obscure or dramatize. Palestinians, living under siege with quotidian terror as the ambience of their lives, need no camera crew to tell them which way the terror is coming. As Jean-Luc Godard used to say, “This is not a just image. It is just an image.”

Only a just approach to the Middle East will bring about a safer future. We will never be able to convince fanatics about anything. But a just approach to the Middle East creates a context in which they wither away. Such an approach entails, among other things, promoting democratic values and norms in all parts of the Middle East, withdrawing our support of repressive regimes, and a just conclusion of the Palestinian question. Such an approach would deprive fanatics of their murderous cause and their legitimacy and legitimize our claims to the ideals we profess as a nation.

If the popular *imagination* is a reservoir of our hopes and fears, it may tell us via a discomfited pedagogy how the geopolitical reality is, in Meaghan Morris’s words, “media-shaped.” If the buoyant consumption of Hollywood terrorist blockbusters by Middle Easterners shows human capacity for conflicted subjectivities, and lessons in how to be a good sport, it gives me a unique vantage point. As I see on the screen the grotesque image of myself/body, and the place where I grew up, I can almost grasp the aesthetic power in violent conditions. Moreover, that image may just allow the American “spectator” to see that I live a relation between that grotesque image and my self/body—one that is maintained in everyday life by the gaze of many others. This is a curiously ambivalent position: I may just be seen for my humanity or I may be subject to “racial profiling.”

In the end, I am happy to be here, even if on September 11 I witnessed too closely the awesome violence I thought I left behind in a land and time far from here and now. September 11 may have seemed like a movie to some people, but to me it was a call to realism, one that Bertolt Brecht saw clearly must challenge us to realize a just and practical humanity: "Realism is an issue not only for literature: it is a major political, philosophical, and practical issue and must be handled and explained as such—as a matter of general human interest."