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“MIRRORING TERROR”: THE IMPACT OF 9/11 ON HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

THOMAS RIEGLER, VIENNA

By drawing upon Siegfried Kracauer’s concept of cinema as a “mirror” of society, this article explores the impact of the “terror years” since 2001 on US cinema. Hollywood was the main cultural apparatus for coping with 9/11, which had left Americans struggling in the “desert of the real” (Zizek). Visual content simplifies traumatic events like the terrorist attacks for audiences—often expressing them in simple Manichean black and white terms and thereby offering moral guidance, unity, and a sense of destiny. Hollywood’s response to 9/11 included all these different aspects: It appealed to an “unbroken” spirit, strove to reassert the symbolic coordinates of the prevailing American reality, and mobilised for a response to new challenges. With time passing, Hollywood also incorporated the mounting doubts and dissent associated with this process. As the review of relating movies of the “terror years” demonstrates, the American film industry has examined, processed, and interpreted the meaning of the terrorist attacks in great variety: Ranging from merely atmospheric references to re-enactments, from pro-war propaganda to critical self-inquiry.

Prenant appui sur le concept de cinéma comme “miroir” de la société chez Siegfried Kracauer, cet article explore l’impact des “années de la terreur” sur le cinéma américain depuis 2001. Hollywood fut un outil culturel crucial dans la gestion du traumatisme du 11 septembre, traumatisme qui a semblé laisser les Américains se débattre dans “le désert du réel” (Zizek). Le contenu visuel des films met à la portée du public des événements traumatiques comme les attaques terroristes (souvent en termes manichéens) ; ce faisant il crée une orientation morale, empreint d’un sentiment d’unité et de destinée. La réponse d’Hollywood au 11 septembre s’est faite sous différents aspects : celui d’un appel à l’esprit national, celui d’une réaffirmation des points cardinaux symboliques de l’identité américaine dominante, et celui de l’instrumentalisation du film en vertu de l’idée de rassemblement propre à réagir à de nouveaux enjeux. Au fil du temps, Hollywood a également incorporé l’accroissement des doutes et des oppositions qui ont accompagné ce processus. Comme en témoignent les critiques des films des “années de la terreur”, l’industrie américaine de la cinématographie a examiné, digéré, et interprété le sens des attaques terroristes sous diverses formes, allant de simples références atmosphériques à la reconstitution historique, en passant par la propagande de guerre et la critique existentialiste.

Introduction: "Let us look in the mirror"

In a 1927 essay film theorist Siegfried Kracauer stated: "Films are the mirror of the prevailing society" (McCormick, Guenther-Pal 99). Again in 1948, he reinforced this argument: "Films supplement real life. [...] They stir our awareness of the intangible, and they reflect the hidden courses of our existence. They point out situations that are often difficult to grasp directly but show, under the surface, what we think about ourselves. [...] Films mirror our reality. Let us look in the mirror" (Von Moltke, Rawson 72). In the course of this article, Kracauer's theme of the cinematic mirror is adapted to sort out various manifestations of socio-political anxieties linked to 9/11 as well as the processing of the terror related trauma and the reaffirmation of America's ideological underpinnings (individual and economic freedom, faith, family). As Kracauer indicated, this engagement is less overt or outspoken, but conveyed indirectly via metaphor, sentiment, and atmosphere. Read this way, "under the surface," the post 9/11 Hollywood pictures express how US society and culture underwent profound changes since 2001: From freedom towards security and paranoia, from perceived stability towards uncertainty.

To start with the origins of the cinematic depiction of terrorism, its modern understanding—as a form of politically motivated violence aiming to achieve mass coverage—was first adapted in the 1970s. Back then terrorism had not yet struck the US directly, the entertainment industry looked abroad for inspiration. Major events like the Munich hostage massacre or the Entebbe rescue mission were re-enacted (*21 Hours at Munich*, 1975, *Victory at Entebbe*, 1976). John Frankenheimer's *Black Sunday* (1977) was exceptional, because it featured Palestinian terrorists targeting the Super Bowl finale (Prince 22–28).



FIG. 1: CRIMINALS POSING AS TERRORISTS
DIE HARD (1988)

This distanced perspective on terrorism radically changed during the 1980s, following the Iranian hostage crisis (1979), the American involvement in the Lebanese civil war (1982–1984), and the resulting confrontation with Shiite extremism. The US became increasingly involved in Middle Eastern conflicts and suffered a string of traumatizing attacks as well as hijackings. As a result, the depiction of terrorism hardened: Its perpetrators were coined as arch enemies of the American Dream, and lacked any legitimate cause (Palmer 164).

The end of the Cold War brought a brief period of easing: Instead of ideological or religious zealots, apolitical terrorists dominated. Fitting the climate of political correctness of the post-Cold War years the movie terrorists of the 1990s are ethnically varied: European radicals (*Passenger 57*, 1992), Irish republicans (*Blown Away*, 1994, *The Devil's Own*, 1997), corrupt Russian military figures in alliance with resentful Bosnian Serbs (*The Peacemaker*, 1997), and Latin American drug lords (*Clear and Present Danger*, 1994). But most of them were homegrown: disgruntled former employees of law enforcement agencies (*Speed*, 1994) and renegade soldiers (*Die Hard II*, 1990, *Operation Broken Arrow*, 1996, *The Rock*, 1996) (Lichtenfeld 170–71).

Among these villains, the jihadist is featured prominently for the first time. His appearance follows in the wake of the bombing of the World Trade Center (1993), the first act of radical Islamist terrorism on US soil. Hollywood reacted swiftly and introduced the

jihadist in films like *True Lies* (1994), *Executive Decision* (1996), *The Siege* (1999), and *Rules of Engagement* (2000) to the screen: Fanatical in his hatred of the US, displaying no regard for innocent life when enacting spectacular violence, and rejecting all possibilities of moderation. Thereby cinema highlighted the emerging danger of religiously inspired mass terror on home soil years before 2001.

After 9/11: Escaping into fantasy, history, and past conflicts

In the immediate period after September 11, 2001, the overriding executive mantra was: “No more movies of mass destruction.” 45 film projects were either cancelled, substantially altered, or postponed. Some commentators even argued that Hollywood was to blame for 9/11, because its movies had prefigured, even “inspired” the terrorist perpetrators (Maher). Director Robert Altman, for example, claimed that such an atrocity would have been unthinkable, “unless they’d seen it in a movie” (Coyle). There were also promises that Hollywood would provide henceforth a “kinder, gentler” form of entertainment – but as Jim Hoberman has remarked, “audiences, though, were not buying it” (Hoberman). During the first months after 9/11, action flicks like *Die Hard* or *True Lies* were rented three times more frequently than before, as if the often agonising inefficacy of real life counterterrorism had to be compensated for in the sphere of entertainment (McCorkle 171). The sense of insecurity also boosted patriotic and warlike themes—shortly after the US invasion of Afghanistan began on 7 October, 2001, “Hollywood started to march to a military beat” (Newsweek). US box office charts were topped by war movies like *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *Behind Enemy Lines* (2001), and *We Were Soldiers* (2002). “There’s a greater understanding now of how you would feel if your country was under attack,” a director commented on the

reasons for this trend (Andson). None of these war movies engaged with the topic of terrorism and instead re-enacted clear cut battlefield victories in Vietnam as well as US contributions to flawed UN interventions in the Balkans and Somalia in the early 1990s—but it did not matter anyway: “Revisiting past conflicts while America waged a new one, they appear as much *about* the US after 9/11 as Vietnam and Somalia, their historical and geographical locales” (Carruthers).

Before the terrorist strikes, such films would have been read as a plea for a reluctant US role in world affairs, but after the terrorist attacks the plot lines were perceived as pro-interventionist—reflecting George W. Bush’s proclamation of the War on Terror as an endeavour that “will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.” In case of *Black Hawk Down*, shortly before the release in December 2001, a postscript was added. It suggested that Washington’s decision to withdraw from Somalia in 1993, as well as its decision not to intervene in Rwanda and Bosnia, “was part of a reluctance to wage war that eventually emboldened America’s enemies to attack the Pentagon and the World Trade Center.” That idea was dropped, as director Ridley Scott concluded it was “a good time” for releasing the movie: “We saw that these soldiers were like firefighters and the police officers and the rescue workers, in that they are all people who would go into burning buildings or under fire without thinking of themselves, but only about their duty” (Malanowski).

The wave of military related films soon ebbed away after the highly controversial US invasion of Iraq in 2003—both the World War II epic *Windtalkers* (2002) and the pro-interventionist *Tears of the Sun* (2003) were low grossing. Commentators found it difficult to determine whether audiences perceived films that glorified the might of the American

military as morally ambiguous or if they were simply war-weary after watching real-life combat on the news (Holson).

In the wake of the terrorist attacks, some experts had warned of a strategic "pact" between Hollywood and Washington promoting patriotism and even jingoism—just like in aftermath of Pearl Harbour (1941). Shortly after 9/11, Jack Valenti, longtime president of the Motion Picture Association of America, had indeed assured that the industry would answer the call: "Many people in Hollywood are veterans that fought in other wars and they are ready to fight again if their country needs them" (Valenti). But in retrospect, the response proved to be more ambivalent than straightforward propaganda.

A major part was in fact pure escapism: Monumental struggles between the forces of light and darkness were extremely popular after 9/11. In reference to the *Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003) trilogy, critic Lev Grossman explained the fascination of this matter—especially in comparison to the murky struggle against terrorism: "Tolkien gives us the war we wish we were fighting—a struggle with a foe whose face we can see, who fights on the open battlefield, far removed from innocent civilians. In Middle Earth, unlike the Middle East, you can tell an evildoer, because he or she looks evil" (Grossman). Similarly, one of the reasons why the *Harry Potter* (2001–2011) and *The Chronicles of Narnia* (2005/2008/2010) franchises struck a note with audiences was that the stories engaged with notions of war, leadership, dangers of power, heroism, and personal sacrifice—all relevant in uncertain times. "You could look at the Harry Potter series through the veil of 9/11," a *New York Times* critic explained. "It became very difficult not to, with the idea of Lord Voldemort as the evildoer of all evildoers who was going to try to take down [the world]. And the apocalyptic ending reaffirmed that for me" (White).

The simple narrative of the superhero myth was also favoured as if the events had instilled new belief in the need of lone and all-powerful individuals rising up to the challenge. Commenting on the Superman remake *Man of Steel* (2013) and questioning the cultural reasons behind the current burst of the genre, Joe Queenan argued that "superhero movies are made for a society that has basically given up. The police can't protect us, the government can't protect us, there are no more charismatic loners to protect us and the Euro is defunct. Clint Eastwood has left the building. So let's turn things over to the vigilantes" (Queenan).

Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy was the trendsetter for this realignment of the previously goofy superhero genre: It became darker, pessimistic, and pseudo-realistic. In *Batman Begins* (2005), Gotham City's water supply and public transport system is attacked in order to spread a toxin that instils fear and chaos. *The Dark Knight* (2008) put forward the "Joker," who terrorises Gotham City with such elaborate schemes that Batman has no other option except to fight "fire with fire." According to Douglas Kellner, the Joker is presented „as the spirit of anarchy and chaos of a particularly destructive and nihilistic nature. In the contemporary context, the Joker represents the spirit of terrorism and the film is full of iconography related to 9/11" (Kellner 11). In *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), Batman has to take on the masked mercenary Bane, who aims to destroy Gotham City in a nuclear explosion.

The more ironic *Iron Man* movies (2008, 2010, 2013) feature the hero, Tony Stark, flying in his mechanical suit pounding a radical-Islamic group called "Ten Rings." *Iron Man 3* finally introduces its leader, a Bin Laden look-alike superterrorist called the "Mandarin", who hacks himself into TV airwaves to present threatening messages. But ultimately, he is revealed as an actor hired to



FIG. 2: RECALLED TO DUTY – CAPTAIN AMERICA. THE FIRST AVENGER (2011)

portray a menace to deflect attention from an out-of-control scientific programme. This sort of plotline exemplifies the contradictory nature of the studios approach to 9/11: “They want to tap into the powerful reactions those events induced, while dodging the complex issues and especially the political arguments that might turn off ticket buyers” (Dragis “Bang Boom”).

While 9/11 references in superhero movies are diffuse and not direct assertions, there is a major shift in the representation of the central characters that captures the pessimism of the post 9/11 mindset. Whether it is Batman, Captain America, Superman, Iron Man, Spiderman, Wolverine, or Thor, these heroes suffer setbacks and humiliating defeats – in fact, they all come across as flawed, traumatised, and ultimately ambivalent, but nonetheless they keep doing what is “necessary” (Pollard 183).

According to some critics, Hollywood’s exploration of the post 9/11 world had started in earnest with Steven Spielberg’s *War of the Worlds* (2005): A modern adaptation of the classic extraterrestrial invasion story by H. G. Wells, *The Guardian* labelled the film „the first piece of multiplex fodder ripped straight from the rubble of 9/11” (Preston). Spielberg remarked on the connections of his film to reality: “I think 9/11 reinforced everything I’m putting into *War of the Worlds*. Just how we come together, how this nation unites in every known way to survive a foreign invader

and a frontal assault. We now know what it feels like to be terrorized” (Abramowitz). Overall, similar to the Cold War era, there was a string of alien invasion scenarios brought to the screen: *Skyline* (2010), *Cowboys and Aliens* (2010), *Super 8* (2011), and *Pacific Rim* (2013). According to director Paul Haggis the *Transformers* series (2007-2011) offered a “fantasy where the message is that if we can’t win over there, we can win it at home on our screens” (Jaafar 20). In these films two races of good and evil robots battle each other right in the middle of downtown Chicago. The teenage hero, who is told by an officer, “You are a soldier now,” absorbs the lesson of the struggle quickly: “No sacrifice, no victory” (Jaafar 16-21). The same message was picked up by *World Invasion: Battle Los Angeles* (2011) and *Battleship* (2012), where the US-military has to fight full scale alien invasions. On the other hand, the more anti-imperialist leanings of James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), so far the highest-grossing film of all time, suggested that after almost a decade, a majority of the public had turned away from the Bush doctrine (O’Hehir). President Obama’s subsequent shift from interventionism to drone strikes and special forces missions was addressed in *Star Trek: Into Darkness* (2013): Here, Captain Kirk (Chris Pine) chooses to capture terrorist mastermind Khan, who bombed Star Fleet’s main archive building, for trial instead of killing him extrajudicial with a long range torpedo.

Revisiting the past also offered an approach for filmmakers: By depicting the crusades (*Kingdom of Heaven*, 2005), by replaying the myths of the ancient world (*Troy*, 2004, *Alexander*, 2005, *300*, 2007, *Immortals*, 2011), or by reimagining American history and legends (*Gangs of New York*, 2002, *Alamo*, 2004, *The New World*, 2005, *Good Night, and Good Luck*, 2005, *Flags of our Fathers*, 2006, *There will be Blood*, 2007, *Lincoln*, 2012) the present day situation could

be addressed in an indirect way. For example, film scholar Stephen Prince suggested that *300*—a comic book adaptation featuring the heroic last stand of the Spartans against the superior Persian army—uses contemporary conflicts as templates, “and it provides and an argument and a justification for waging war against Iraq and Iran” (Prince 291). Slavoj Žižek instead proposed a very different reading by setting the rigid, “fundamentalist” Spartan identity in contrast to the “multiculturalist different-lifestyles paradise” of the Persians (Žižek 2007).

The pitched battle scenes in movies like *300* offered clarity and oversight lacking in the “real” world, as well as the certainty that the forces of good will eventually triumph. “This is our way of dealing with 9/11 and how we feel about those foreigners, and those terrorists, whom we are trying very hard to define”, a film historian told the *New York Times* under the headline: “At the movies, at least, good vanquishes evil” (Waxmann).

New age of fear, horror, and dystopia

In a 2008 piece for *The Atlantic Monthly* Ross Douhat argued that after 9/11 Hollywood returned to the “paranoid, cynical, end-of-empire 1970s” (Douhat). There are indeed many similarities between the 1970s and the 2000s: Both were decades of political and social crisis, producing, among other results, a pessimistic cultural outlook. For instance, after 9/11 Hollywood envisioned the dark, amoral world of unregulated and destructive corporate power in a similar way to the 1970s: *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), *Syriana* (2005), *Blood Diamond* (2006), *Shooter* (2007), *Michael Clayton* (2007), *War Inc.* (2008), *Nothing But the Truth* (2008), *State of Play* (2009), and *Fair Game* (2010) are populated with powerful schemers, who use every means necessary to enhance power, profits, and personal gain. “America isn’t a



FIG. 3: A THOUGHTFUL HITMAN—BRAD PITT IN *KILLING THEM SOFTLY* (2012)

country; it’s a business,” a thoughtful hitman declares in *Killing Them Softly* (2012), and turns to one of his colleagues: “Now give me my money” (Scott “One Bad Turn”). Another distinct 1970s character also returned—the vigilante: *Man on Fire* (2004), *The Punisher* (2004), *Hitman* (2007), *The Brave One* (2007), and *Jack Reacher* (2012) show lonely avengers going on wild rampages.

Another major parallel to the 1970s is the boom of horror. Since 2001, a retro-trend brought remakes of almost all classics, often made by their veteran directors. Notably, George A. Romero returned with *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2008), and *Survival of the Dead* (2009). Romero integrated certain contemporary influences into his movies: “The idea of living with terrorism—I’ve tried to make it more applicable to the concerns Americans are going through now” (Beale). As during the 1970s, in post 9/11 horror, evil lurks in remote places at home, mostly in red state territory and in the shape of ignorant, reactionary or retarded backwoodsmen, whose “appetite” for slaying youngsters seems insatiable. This reflects the tensions and divisions within American society—whether it is about the difference between city and countryside or diverging opinions on morals, religion, and politics. Thus, like in the classics, the main characters find themselves suddenly beset by savage strangers and deadly threats (*Wrong*

Turn, 2003, *The Devil's Reject*, 2005, *Turistas*, 2006, *Hatchet*, 2007). Some of the recent horror films even had a distinct trademark of their own: *Hostel* (2005), *Hostel: Part II* (2007), or *Saw* (six parts between 2004 and 2009) feature explicit and up-close violence that is administered on the victims in lengthy sessions. Critics labelled this “torture porn” (Edelstein), while director Eli Roth remarked that his two *Hostel* films were simply made through the lenses of 9/11 and the War on Terror (Braxton).

There was also widespread demand for disaster movies: Unlike its 1970s predecessors, the post 9/11 films neither provide moral rallying points nor successful counterstrokes, but appear utterly pessimistic: The US government is too slow to respond to the rapid climate change in *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004). When Earth is hit by a series of quakes and mega-tsunamis in *2012* (2009), elites are concerned solely with their own survival: While leaving the rest of mankind to perish, they survive on board of pre-constructed arks. More realistically, *Contagion* (2011) evokes the spectre of a swiftly collapsing order as a result of a spreading killer virus. A pandemic that turns humans into zombies causes global apocalypse in *World War Z* (2013)—not so much a film about the undead, but a concrete take on government inadequacy and public panic in the face of overwhelming disaster. “The general premise is that anything can happen, in any kind of scenario, on any given day,” director Marc Forster commented (*World War Z* production notes).

A threat from the outside is realised in *Red Dawn* (2012), where large parts of the US fall prey to ruthless North Korean invaders: The conservative leaning film hints that the country has left itself open to Communist occupation, because of weak foreign policy, squandering military might, and economic decline (O’Sullivan). *Rise of the Planet of*

the Apes (2011) depicts mankind in the role of the oppressor until mutated chimpanzees and gorillas throw off their shackles and spread havoc: “It’s the end of the world as we know it, and the animals feel fine” (Dragis “Apocalypse”).

On a more personal level, *Taking Shelter* (2011) features Curtis LaForche (Michael Shannon), a young husband and father, tormented by apocalyptic visions that spell danger to his loved ones. In the progress, LaForche becomes more and more obsessed with providing security for his family, and this paranoia threatens to unravel everything he cares about (Scott “Splintering Psyche”). Once Armageddon has passed, the struggle for survival continues even more mercilessly in dystopias like *I Am Legend* (2009), *The Road* (2009), *The Book of Eli* (2010), *The Hunger Games* (2012), *Oblivion* (2013), and *Elysium* (2013). Supposedly, even god “got tired of all the bullshit”—and so he sends an army of angels to destroy mankind in *Legion* (2010). Pictures like these stress that the only hope for humanity lies in virtues such as love, self-sacrifice, and faith—typical cultural reactions to states of uncertainty.

9/11 arrives on the screen

Drawing up a conclusion on the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks, Jim Hoberman observed on Hollywood’s output that “the events of 9/11 were to be avenged but not relived.” While it formed the emotional background for all kinds of escapist adventures, there was considerably less interest in depicting the actual event. Thus, the first films relating to 9/11 did this in a consciously distanced way, aiming not to attract controversy. According to the *New York Times*, the trauma “quietly arrived, writ small in a series of new pictures that have no political content but that are suffused with a deep, enduring sense of grief born in

the tragedy's wake" (Farber). First came *The Guys* (2002): It featured a journalist helping a FDNY captain who lost nine men in the Twin Towers to compose eulogies. Spike Lee's *25th Hour* (2002), released 15 months after the terrorist attacks, follows a convicted New York drug dealer on his last day of freedom before beginning a seven-year prison sentence (LaSalle).

It took more than five years for the entertainment industry to tackle 9/11 directly: In *United 93* (2006) Paul Greengrass retold the story of the hijacked flight that did not reach its intended target on September 11th. Instead it crashed into a field in Pennsylvania, supposedly because the passengers revolted against the hijackers. Since *United 93* is all about civilian heroism, the motivation and personal background of the terrorists remain completely obscure to the viewer. Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006) did not even show the planes hitting the towers, instead focused on the miraculous rescue of two survivors from Ground Zero. *The Great New Wonderful* (2005) presented a series of vignettes of incidents taking place concurrently around Manhattan – without mentioning 9/11 (Abramowitz, Horn). The event was further domesticated in the buddy movie *Reign Over Me* (2007), where two former college roommates meet up again by chance on a Manhattan street corner. One of them has lost his family on 9/11 and is unable to cope with the tragedy (Prince 120).

9/11 forms the emotional climax in the love drama *Remember Me* (2010): Tyler (Robert Pattinson) is last seen in his father's office on the 88th floor of the World Trade Center and it is later revealed that the date is 11 September 2001. For that, the film was criticized as "appalling" and "exploitative," because it uses 9/11 as "a simple plot device" (White). *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2011) focuses on an eleven year old New



FIG. 4: SPACE INVADERS TARGET DOWNTOWN MANHATTAN IN THE AVENGERS (2012)

Yorker coping with the loss of his father in the rubble of the World Trade Center. According to Manohla Dragis the film "isn't about Sept. 11. It's about the impulse to drain that day of its specificity and turn it into yet another wellspring of generic emotions: sadness, loneliness, happiness. This is how kitsch works" (Dragis "Youngster with a Key"). Like many other 9/11 movies, the 40 million dollar production was not well received at the box office, but gained an Academy Award nomination nonetheless.

The obvious preference for escapism was again confirmed by the success of the safely immersing *Cloverfield* (2011): It reimagined the terrorist strikes as a sudden devastating attack by a giant monster that topples skyscrapers and major landmarks. A similarly spectacular action showdown in the middle of Manhattan can be found in the superhero film *The Avengers* (2012). The images of urban destruction turn it, according to Jim Hoberman, into a watershed—Hollywood is "no longer afraid to tackle 9/11": "*The Avengers* demonstrates how completely 9/11 has been superseded by another catastrophe, namely the financial meltdown of September 2008" (Hoberman).

From commentary to historization

As mentioned, a direct examination of 9/11 was a sort of taboo in the early stages. Terrorism related films like *Collateral Damage* (2002) and *The Sum of All Fears* (2002), which had been produced before 2001, were suddenly out of touch with the new paradigm. The *Sum of All Fears* was much noticed because it displayed the nuclear destruction of Baltimore, but when it came to the depiction of the enemy—European Neo-Nazis—the film was criticized for being implausible. Hereupon, “9/11 rang down the curtain on Hollywood’s theatre of mass destruction, at least for a while,” Stephen Prince noted (70). But with growing distance, filmmakers began to focus on the War on Terror, its progress and implications, both domestic and international. Stephen Spielberg chose a historical analogy to place a comment on the counterterrorism struggle: His film *Munich* (2005), the adaptation of a novel telling the story of the Israeli revenge for the massacre of its athletes during the 1972 Olympics, explored the cycle of violence engulfing the Middle East. Beyond that, it could also be read as critique of the futility of the War on Terror, with a final lingering shot of the Twin Towers in the distance (Alford 145). Among other issues, *Syriana* (2005) explored how the corruption of the oil business indirectly fuels terrorism, while *Charlie Wilson’s War* (2007) explored the CIA’s collusion with jihadists in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

In productions like these, counterterrorism came across increasingly as an amoral struggle in the shadows—an obvious reaction to the Abu Ghraib scandal and revelations about suspects disappearing in a secret CIA prison network. In *Body of Lies* (2008), agent Roger Ferris (Leonardo DiCaprio) is such a shadow warrior, who sets up a fictitious terror group, equips it with fake bank accounts, and plants messages in fundamentalist chat rooms – in order to flush out an Al Qaeda mastermind



FIG. 5: WESTERN JIHADIST—MICHAEL SHEEN IN UNTHINKABLE (2010)



FIG. 6: MANIPULATED INTO THE IRAQ WAR—GREEN ZONE (2010)

(Stevens). Gavin Hood’s 2007 film *Rendition* took on the opposing perspective by depicting an Arab as the victim of unlawful US vigilance. Although being married to an American wife, he is abducted and sent to a North African country for interrogation. While witnessing the brutality inflicted, the local CIA liaison officer begins to doubt the agency’s methods: “In all the years we’ve been doing this, how often can you say that we’ve produced truly legitimate intelligence?” (Alford 150). *The Kingdom* (2007) can be seen as an alternative scenario in its depiction of a successful cooperation between Western and Middle Eastern police forces (Scott 28 Sept. 2007). Due to disappointing box office results, the adaptation of terrorism related themes decreased between 2009 and 2012. *Unthinkable* (2010), a movie about an FBI interrogator caught in the moral dilemma of a classic “ticking bomb” scenario, was released direct-to-video.

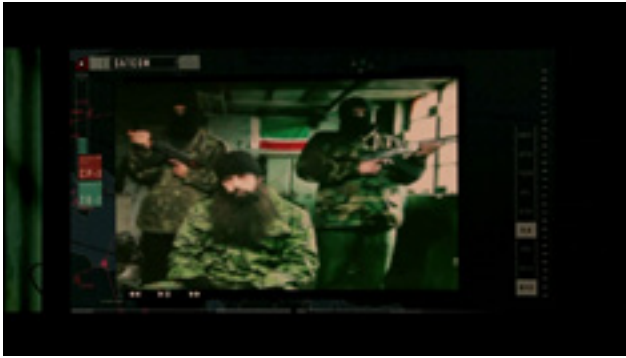


FIG. 7: JIHADIST VIDEO COMMUNICATION IN ACT OF VALOR (2012)

Compared to this rather slow adaptation of counterterrorism, the war in Iraq arrived on screen with unparalleled speed: “Not since World War II has Hollywood so embraced an ongoing conflict. It took years for pop culture to tackle the Korean wars, and it took time before the country was ready to be entertained by those politically charged conflicts” (Soriano, Oldenburg). Yet most of the Iraq movies did not focus on the conflict, but instead on the homecoming of the veterans, or the plight of military families left behind (*Land of the Brave*, 2006, *In the Valley of Elah*, 2007, *Badland*, 2007, *Grace is Gone*, 2007, *Stop Loss*, 2008). *Redacted* (2007) and *The Hurt Locker* (2008) took on the perspective of GIs hopelessly entrapped in a “dirty” conflict, which they do not understand and often turn their frustration against civilians. *Lions for Lambs* (2007) and *Green Zone* (2010) openly contradicted the official lineage of the Bush administration in regard to the war effort and addressed issues of political accountability and manipulation. But just like the 9/11 films, most of these productions failed commercially—even the acclaimed *The Hurt Locker* was the lowest grossing Best Picture winner since the fifties (Harris).

In comparison, the Vietnam movies of the 1970s and 1980s had the benefit of hindsight and offered an opportunity to reflect from



FIG. 8: JUSTIFIED REVENGE FOR 9/11—IDENTIFYING OSAMA BIN LADEN (ZERO DARK THIRTY, 2012)

a distance on what had gone wrong (Jaafar 16–21). Compared to past conflicts, the Global War on Terror, despite its length, had always remained enigmatic and distant to the larger public. As Luke Buckmasters has pointed out: “The war on terrorism, as we know it, invokes a muddled sense of time and location. Its themes are both old and new and the enemy is impossible to relegate to a specific geographic area. The trickier enemies are to define, the harder they are to visualise.” (Buckmasters). The surprising box office success of *Act of Valor* (2012) demonstrated that military related themes still resonated with audiences, once they were removed from the messy context of Iraq and Afghanistan. The movie featured supposedly real-life Special Forces operatives on missions in Costa Rica, the Sudan, and Mexico that ultimately thwart the hideous plans of a jihadist network (Pinkerton).

Shortly before the tenth anniversary of 9/11, some key policy decisions and events put both the US counterterrorism approach and its cultural representation in a new framework: The killing of Osama Bin Laden (2011) marked a highly symbolic US victory. Within a year, the US strike was undergoing dramatization in a TV adaptation (*Seal Team Six. The Raid on Osama Bin Laden*, 2012) and a movie: *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). Also in 2011, the US withdrew its combat troops from Iraq

and scheduled a retreat from Afghanistan for 2014, effectively concluding the Global War on Terror as outlined by George W. Bush.

The outlook on radical Islamic terrorism and 9/11 is therefore set to evolve from social and political commentary to a gradual historicization of the subject. For the first time *Zero Dark Thirty* applied this retrospective outlook: Originally outlined as a narrowly focused and closed-ended investigation of the failure of the US military to apprehend Bin Laden in late 2001, the successful raid on Abbottabad had changed the storyline completely. *Zero Dark Thirty* now chronicled the eventually successful ten year manhunt for Osama Bin Laden, while highlighting the moral costs (Harris). According to Manohla Dragis, the movie depicts “the dark side of that war. It shows the unspeakable and lets us decide if the death of Bin Laden was worth the price we paid” (Dragis “By any means”). However, *Zero Dark Thirty* is forceful in its portrayal of the War on Terror as a form of justified revenge for the horrors of 9/11—illuminated in the beginning by featuring emergency phone calls from the burning towers and hijacked planes against a black screen (Westwell 86).

This shifting perspective on 9/11, moving from reality towards history, is further amplified by a loss in significance on part of the counterterrorism struggle: Since 2007/2008 economic woes have increasingly replaced the fear of terrorism as priority No. 1 on the public agenda. The financial crisis and the huge budget deficit also have widespread consequences for the US role in world affairs: In 2012 President Obama pledged that the US would only fight war that “absolutely necessary” (McGreal and Williams) from now on, effectively concluding the era of post 9/11 interventionism. It is likely that the recession and a resulting demise of confidence in the American Dream could affect the public mind in a more lasting way than the shock of the 9/11 attacks. Hollywood has begun to come

to terms with the slump and its effects (*Up in the Air*, 2009, *The Company Men*, 2010, *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, 2010, *Margin Call*, 2011, *Moneyball*, 2011, *Cosmopolis*, 2012, *Arbitrage*, 2012, *Promised Land*, 2012).

By 2013 even the post 9/11 reticence of depicting terrorism as blockbuster entertainment was all but gone: *G.I. Joe Retaliation*, *Olympus Has Fallen*, and *White House Down* featured major institutions of American democracy being taken over and tarnished by terrorists. The fact that audiences seemed prepared to watch the White House, the Capitol, or Air Force One destroyed indicates for some observers that “Americans have mentally recovered from the shock of 9/11.” Others drew a different conclusion in highlighting the paranoid and self-hating notions of these scenarios (Harris “9/11 taboo”).

Hollywood’s stance on terrorism

The following section examines the critical question of how Hollywood movies process the definition and substance of “terrorism” for audiences both aesthetically and ideologically. Although the output varies in relationship to its specific context, the political and ideological subtext conveyed by Hollywood’s terrorism films can be distilled in certain core narratives:

(1.) Terrorism is the product of “mad,” psychotic minds and essentially “un-American”: This used to be the quintessential message of 1970s and 1980s scenarios. Following the end of the Cold War certain enemy stereotypes were discarded, but the terrorist remained as a mere de-politicized “shell”—depicted as a greedy criminal impostor. While this narrative was practically abandoned after 2001, it has resurfaced lately in form of a retro trend: *Die Hard 4.0* (2007) and *A Good Day to Die Hard* (2013) stick to the old formula of criminals or renegades hiding behind a fake agenda. The hijacker in

the remake of *The Taking of Pelham 1-2-3* (2009) bets on media coverage affecting the stock market so that his own investments pay off (Cettl 16). Likewise, the climactic showdown of *White House Down* reveals the devastating attack by a rightwing militia at the heart of government as a disguised coup d'état. Even the controversial choice of North Korean commandos as the enemy in *Olympus Has Fallen* is quickly abated by fact that the group is led by an extremist acting on his own impulse.

(2.) The dark side of counterterrorism, the employment of extralegal and "dirty measures," is not left out of the picture. Critical movies, for instance, highlight the CIA's reliance on proxy forces groups to suppress Latin American guerrillas in the 1980s (*Under Fire* 1983, *Walker*, 1987). In 2001, *Spy Game* recounts parts of the CIA's dark Cold War history: The Phoenix assassination programme during the Vietnam War as well as the unsuccessful attempt to kill a Shiite sheikh in Beirut during the 1980s. In the latter case, the bombing results in considerable civilian "collateral damage." Furthermore, the Jason Bourne franchise (*The Bourne Identity*, 2002, *The Bourne Supremacy*, 2004, *The Bourne Ultimatum*, 2007, *The Bourne Legacy*, 2012) features a corrupt CIA undercover unit orchestrating a string of assassinations concealed as counterterrorism measures (Valantin 103–04). In contrast, conservative films tend to present this escalation of violence as the most practical way to defeat terrorism. Such missions are already outsourced in *The Expendables* (2010) and *Expendables 2: Back for War* (2012): Whether it is overthrowing a Latin American dictatorship or preventing Russian plutonium falling into terrorist hands, a band of mercenaries does the job.

(3.) It is perhaps ironic that despite its preoccupation with terrorism, Hollywood in fact takes little interest in the subject itself. By



FIG. 9: THE FACE OF THE ENEMY "OTHER"—THE EXPENDABLES (2010)

large the terrorist is simply a "sign" and almost never developed as a believable character. Although it is true that terrorist masterminds repeatedly lay down their agenda and accuse the US and its foreign policy, this comes across as "loony" talk by fanatical madmen (Vanhala 238). For example, *Air Force One* (1997), grants hijacker Ivan Korshunov (Gary Oldman) a moment of explanatory rhetoric, but in the context of the scene, this is nothing but self-serving cynicism put forward by a thug, who threatens women and children (Auge).

In recent films, declarations by terrorists are sparser and less over the top: In *Body of Lies* mastermind Al Sameen brags about future plans of his network: "As we destroyed the bus in Sheffield last week, we will be ready for the operation in Britain. We avenge the American wars on the Muslim world." Yet this megalomania quickly results in his downfall—Al Sameen's drive for publicity exposes him to joint US-Jordanian counterterrorism (Pollard 119). As the mentioned films indicate, there may be blowback stemming from Western policies, but such grievances are no excuse for killing and maiming innocent people. Terrorism is thoroughly illegitimate and has to be met on its own terms (Boggs, Pollard 207).

In contrast, European films like the Western German outlook on the leftwing terrorism of the 1970s tend to deconstruct terrorism (*Deutschland im Herbst*, 1977, *Die bleierne*

Zeit, 1981, *Stammheim*, 1986, *Die innere Sicherheit*, 2000, *Baader*, 2002, *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*, 2010, *Wer, wenn nicht wir*, 2011). These movies consciously focus on the terrorist personality as well as on the inner group dynamics of terrorist organizations, subjects largely omitted by Hollywood. But overall, the German films explore the political and social environment in which the actors are operating and how it is transformed in the wake of the confrontation with law enforcement. This results in multi-layered accounts instead of clear-cut good vs. evil.

Conclusion

In the wake of the 9/11 some commentators went as far as to proclaim the “end of the age of irony” or a “turning point against a generation of cynicism for all of us” (Kakutani). With the benefit of hindsight, Michiko Kakutani reached a more sober conclusion about the impact of the terrorist strikes on popular culture: “We know now that the New Normal was very much like the Old Normal, at least in terms of the country’s arts and entertainment. [...]. Ten years later, it is even clearer that 9/11 has not provoked a seismic change in the arts” (Kakutani). While 9/11 may have been no watershed, it left a profound impact nonetheless: Terrorism and relating fears, paranoia and insecurity, were all but prime ingredients of Hollywood cinema since 2001.

Anger, brooding and melancholy displayed both by super- and action heroes were indicators of post 9/11 Hollywood’s preference of ambiguities over absolutes. As A. O. Scott has pointed out, this grimness of the heroes “arose less from the moral defect of being tempted by evil than from their intimate knowledge of its depths. They could be lawless, vengeful, guilty and tormented, but only because the enemies they faced were so utterly beyond the reach of compassion or reason” (Scott “Worst Enemies”). The ensuing

Manichean battles were so intense because villains like Voldemort, the Joker, or Bane pursued grandiose schemes that were aimed directly against the established order of things. Their dark conviction, as articulated by Bane (“It doesn’t matter who we are, what matters is our plan”), not only set them apart from traditional criminals, but was reminiscent of terrorist zeal.

Apocalyptic themes, paranoia, and graphic violence were as popular as during the 1970s, a decade of similar upheaval and scepticism in society. After 2001, besides the fear of terrorism there was a growing awareness of further threats like pandemics, natural disasters, or the breakdown of society.

Furthermore, the post 9/11 period gave rise to a whole set of political movies that addressed the Global War on Terror and its consequences. Critic Peter Bradshaw labelled them “liberal fence-sitters”: Agonised, conscience-stricken, “but still unwilling to risk being disloyal to anyone” (Bradshaw). Indeed, as the box office results demonstrated, audiences preferred indirect approaches to overtly political ones. That choice may have contributed to Hollywood’s uneasiness in representing the actual events of 9/11. For a large segment of the public the traumatic event is still too raw, too hard to grasp in its entirety, and thus is considered an unsuitable theme for mere entertainment (Smith). As indicated, the 2011 killing of Osama Bin Laden may herald a new phase of recollection and reassessment, which may leave more possibilities for the sort of catharsis many experts noted was absent so far.

Generally, Hollywood provides valuable insight into the social and political realities of its context. In his complication on cinema in the “Bush-Cheney Era,” Douglas Kellner has observed: “Films can display social realities of the events and phenomena of an

epoch. But films can also provide allegorical representations that interpret, comment, and indirectly portray aspects of an era" (14). In reference to the post 9/11 years, Hollywood has reflected the essence of that period. At the core, it addressed the profound sense of vulnerability and shattered innocence felt in the wake of the terrorist attacks. For the first time since 1941, the US had been hit on home soil. In this specific situation, cinematic fiction came into play as a major cultural means to engage with a radically altered world. Overall, the cultural "mirror" tells of a society deeply affected by fear and uncertainty, while struggling to find new meaning. That may be the "terror years" most enduring legacy.

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Image Notes

Figure 1: *Die Hard*. Dir. John McTiernan. 20th Century Fox, 1988.

Figure 2: *Captain America – The First Avenger*. Dir. Joe Johnston. Marvel Studios, 2011.

Figure 3: *Killing Them Softly*. Dir. Andrew Dominik. Annapurna Pictures, 1984 Private Defense Contractors, Plan B Entertainment, Chockstone Pictures, 2010.

Figure 4: *The Avengers*. Dir. Joss Whedon. Marvel Studios, 2012.

Figure 5: *Unthinkable*. Dir. Gregor Jordan. Lleju Productions, Sidney Kimmel Entertainment, Kimmel International, ChubbCo Film, Senator Entertainment Co., 2010.

Figure 6: *Green Zone*. Dir. Paul Greengrass. Working Title Films, 2010.

Figure 7: *Act of Valor*. Dir. Mike McCoy and Scott Waugh. Bandito Brothers, 2012.

Figure 8: *Zero Dark Thirty*. Dir. Kathryn Bigelow. Anapurna Pictures, 2012.

Figure 9: *The Expendables*. Dir. Sylvester Stallone. Nu Image and Millennium Films, 2010.

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