The Age of Sympathy:
Re-examining discourses of Muslim terrorism in Hollywood beyond the 'pre-' and 'post-9/11' dichotomy

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The events of September 11 did not herald a new age of terrorism, for terrorism had been primarily fuelled by religion since the 1980s; however, the 9/11 attacks did herald changes in the representation of terrorism in Hollywood cinema, with an increased frequency of Muslim antagonists, more sinister and deadly than their pre-9/11 compatriots. While pre- and post-9/11 images have been investigated in previous studies, the continued evolution of Middle Eastern characters in the decade since the attacks has rarely been discussed. This paper examines six Hollywood action films released between 1991 and 2011 (a decade prior to and after the attacks) through an Orientalism critique, investigating how representations of Muslim terrorists in Western popular culture have evolved. The findings support earlier research on a discursive shift immediately post-9/11, but also reveal a second shift in representation, occurring approximately half a decade after the attacks. Cinematic representations immediately after the attacks positioned Muslim terrorists as sympathetic individuals seduced to commit acts of terrorism by religious fundamentalism. However, from 2007 onwards, representations again change, framing onscreen Muslim terrorists as willing participants in violent activities motivated by Islamic fundamentalism, with an absence of the earlier sympathetic positioning. This research builds on existing studies into cinematic representations of terrorism and extends our knowledge of the cinematic discourses of the Hollywood Muslim terrorist, a subject to which continued media and public attention is directed.

Introduction

When hijacked commercial aircraft crashed into the World Trade Centre in New York City on September 11, 2001 (9/11), the world of terrorism did not change. Religion-fuelled acts had been the dominant form of terrorism since the 1980s, replacing those driven by leftist ideologies (Rapoport, 2004). However, the 9/11 attacks *did* change popular Western media representations of terrorism.

From the moment they occurred, the 9/11 attacks and Hollywood were intricately connected. The attacks, seen as "the largest human-made intentional disaster in U.S. history" (Fairbrother et al., 2004, p. 1367), affected Hollywood unlike any other event in human history (Pollard, 2011), with Hollywood described as "the locus for America's negotiation of September 11 and its aftermath" (Schoop and Hill, 2009, p. 13). Hollywood productions have considerable potential to inform audience understandings of significant public events, including terrorism, given they are not only consumed in the United States, but exported to media markets around the world. As Riegler notes, "cinema is often overlooked… Filmmakers play a key role in the creation of 'history' as the past is imagined, imitated, and envisioned on screen" (2011, p. 155).

The changing nature of cinematic terrorism, particularly terrorism conducted by Muslim antagonists, has been thoroughly studied since the attacks. This literature (e.g. Ivory et al., 2007; Pollard, 2011) finds that 9/11 brought about changes in the representations of terrorism in Hollywood cinema, with an increased frequency of Middle Eastern antagonists who are more sinister and deadly than their pre-9/11 predecessors. However, this body of research focused primarily on the immediate pre- and post-9/11 dichotomy of imagery, and not on addressing the manner in which media images of Muslim terrorism have continued to evolve. This evolution is important because, despite over a decade elapsing since the 9/11 attacks, terrorism is still prominent in the media and the minds of citizens around the world. Further, Muslim terrorist characters continue to occupy an important position in American culture

(Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, 2009), with terrorism "still popularly understood to be a Muslim phenomenon," (Torres, 2013, p. 171) and seen as an obstacle to global security (Aly, 2014).

This paper reports an exploratory study examining six Hollywood action films released between 1991 and 2011—a decade prior to and after the attacks—and argues that while dominant media imagery of the Muslim terrorist shifted significantly in the aftermath of 9/11, it has undergone a further evolution in the decade since the attacks. After establishing a baseline of dominant pre-9/11 discourses of Muslim terrorism, characterised as one-dimensional 'baddies' who are motivated by revenge rather than religion, this paper discusses through an Orientalist critique how initial post-9/11 imagery was framed with a discourse of sympathy: Muslim villains were established onscreen as innocent victims of circumstances beyond their control, seduced by the Muslim faith to commit terrorism to give their life meaning. However, around 2007, Muslim characters became willing participants in acts of terrorism, with their motives for carrying out these attacks framed as fundamentalist interpretations of Islam. This more recent imagery calls back to pre-9/11 imagery of Muslim terrorism, where characters are willing participants in the acts they commit. The findings of this paper provide a re-examination of how Hollywood has represented the Muslim terrorist in the decade since the 9/11 attacks, moving beyond the "pre- versus post-9/11" dichotomy of images that have been the focus of previous research in this field.

9/11 and the Muslim Hollywood Terrorist

Following the 9/11 attacks, academics very quickly began to examine the effect of these events on the production of popular culture. By the end of 2001, researchers were beginning to explore how Hollywood would respond to the attacks (Aretxaga, 2001). Research has examined the effects of 9/11 on a broad range of media texts, including newspapers and news reporting (Altheide, 2006; Aly, 2007; Bossio, 2007; Gerhards and Schäfer, 2013; McGregor, 2013; Reid and Cover, 2010; Sanz Sabido, 2009), television programs (Alsultany, 2013; Andrejevic, 2011; Torres, 2013), music, children's literature and comic books (Schoop and Hill, 2009). Numerous studies have examined the impacts on Hollywood across genres, including horror and science fiction, studying analogical explorations of 9/11 (e.g. Dixon, 2004a, 2004b; Erickson, 2007; Flynn and Salek, 2012; Holland, 2012, Kellner, 2010, Muntean, 2009, Sánchez-Escalonilla, 2010; Stockwell, 2011). Films such as *Munich* (2005, dir. Steven Spielberg) and *United 93* (2006, dir. Paul Greengrass), which portray real world terrorist attacks, have also been a strong focus of study (Dodds, 2008; Pollard, 2011; Schoop & Hill, 2009).

Despite being the focus of sustained academic scrutiny, research gaps persist in our understanding of the evolution of post-9/11 Muslim terrorism imagery in Hollywood. Ewart and Halim (2013) note the continued research gaps around the interplay between the media and 9/11 and the lack of longitudinal studies in the field over a decade since the attacks.

This paper reports an exploratory study examining six Hollywood action films released between 1991 and 2011. While images of Muslim terrorists are not confined to Hollywood and feature commonly in many media products, Hollywood films were selected as the research focus as they are seen to dominate the creation of discursive myths in Western culture (Shaheen, 2003a). In the US, the number of viewers of major studio films is higher than for political news channels such as C-SPAN (Schollmeyer, 2005). Outside the US, these productions are exported to media audiences in over 150 countries around the world where they are consumed more readily that local film productions, with the US the world's leading exporter of screen images (Shaheen, 2003a, 2008).

While there is no clear figure for the number of appearances of Muslim terrorists in Hollywood films in recent years, Cettl (2008) identifies over 285 terrorist-themed films released between 1960 and 2008, while Shaheen (2001, 2008) identifies over 1000 appearances of characters he codes as Arab in Hollywood over the last century, with over 100 since the 9/11 attacks took place. These studies of cinematic terrorism examine large numbers of films, demonstrating repetition in Hollywood's imagery of the Muslim terrorist. Shaheen (1987, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2006, 2008) examines onscreen appearances of Arab characters in Hollywood films dating back over a century, isolating filmic tropes that are commonly repeated in these productions. Within these images identified by Shaheen, the practice of the Islamic faith is omnipresent, and frequently linked to acts of violence. Similarly, Cettl (2009) provides an analysis of all terrorist-

themed Hollywood films released since the 1970s. Collectively, these studies demonstrate the limited variety in Hollywood representations of terrorism, particularly those featuring Muslim terrorists, though they stop short of examining why such limited imagery exists.

Within the scope of this research it would be impossible to investigate all appearances of Muslim terrorists in Hollywood films during this period. However, as Yin (2002) notes, case study research, while not providing statistical proof, is able to support certain theoretical predispositions. Six films released between 1991 and 2011, identified in Table 1, were selected to enable close readings of a cross-sectional representation of dominant discourses across the studied period. The 20-year period of study was designed to fully capture the influence of the 9/11 attacks as Hollywood productions have a significant lead in time from conception to release. Six films were chosen as this was considered to be a manageable workload; Daniel (2012) notes within discourse analysis, clear variations can be observed in small samples sizes, and large sample sizes can make studies unmanageable without adding to analytic outcomes.

The films were selected following the initial meta-analysis of existing literature to identify productions which are significant contributors to the discourse during this time, a sampling strategy recommended by Jorgensen and Phillips (2002). While all films of this genre are the product of real-world inspiration, a decision was made to avoid examining films that reproduced well-known terrorist acts, such as *United 93* (2006, dir. Paul Greengrass) or *Munich* (2005, dir. Steven Spielberg). This allowed for the selected texts to be studied without the need to engage with the filmmakers' interpretation of events, and instead, to study films that were not constrained by mediating events well known to the audience. The meta-analysis sampling strategy was complemented by a keyword search of film database IMDb for terms such as "terrorism," "terrorist," and "insurgent," an approach adopted in previous similar studies (e.g. Ivory et al., 2007), to ensure all significant Hollywood films dealing with terrorism were captured in the sample. Finally, the presence of well-known Hollywood stars and commercial box office success were taken into account in determining the final sample, with the results of this analysis presented in Table 1.

Title (released) Director	Notable cast members	Significance
True Lies (1994) Dir.: James Cameron	Arnold Schwarzenegger; Jamie Lee Curtis	$146 million at box office, 3rd highest grossing film of 1994[1] Numerous awards, including special effects, Golden Globe for Jamie Lee Curtis Tie-in video game across four popular platforms "Quintessential 1990s Hollywood counterterrorism fare"[2]
Executive Decision (1996) Dir.: Stuart Baird	Steven Seagal Kurt Russell Halle Berry	$121 million grossed worldwide[3] First film to re-imagine 1970s sub-genre of aircraft hijackings[4]
Syriana (2005) Dir.: Stephen Gaghan	George Clooney Matt Damon Jeffrey Wright Chris Cooper	$94 million at box office[5] Cast of famous Hollywood actors George Clooney won Academy Award and Golden Globe Critically praised for non-stereotypical exploration of Middle East[6]
Rendition (2007) Dir.: Gavin Hood	Jake Gyllenhaal Reese Witherspoon Meryl Streep	$27 million at box office[7] First film to explore effects of post-9/11 Bush doctrine[8]
The Kingdom (2007) Dir.: Peter Berg	Jamie Foxx Chris Cooper Jennifer Garner Jason Bateman	$87 million at box office, ranked second in opening week, considered a commercial success[9] Described as genre re-defining, and inspiration for later films[10]
Body of Lies (2008) Dir.: Ridley Scott	Leonardo DiCaprio Russell Crowe	$108 million at box office, considered a commercial success[11] Well known director of *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982)

Notes:

[1] Shaheen (2001, pp. 500-503); Vanhala (2001, p. 235)

[2] Boggs and Pollard (2006, p. 340)

[3] IMDb (n.d.)

[4] Cettl (2009, p. 117); Pollard (2011, p. 162); Shaheen (2001, p. 189)

[5] Pollard (2011, p. 115)

[6] Pollard (2011, p. 72); Pomerance (2009, p. 43); Shaheen (2008, pp. 169-171)

[7] BoxOffice (n.d.)

[8] Cettl (2009, p. 224)

[9] Box Office Mojo (n.d.), Prince (2011, p. 4), 293; Shaheen (2008, p. 128)

[10] Cettl (2009, p. 225); Prince (2011, p. 293)

[11] Cettl (2008, p. 51); Pollard (2011, p. 129); The-Numbers (n.d.)

The films were initially analysed through a discourse analysis framework and Orientalist critique to detect key discursive elements around their framing and characterisation of Islamic terrorism. Close readings of the films were then undertaken to determine how each film engaged with these discursive themes. This methodology was employed to examine the intertextuality of the films, exploring the repetition, emergence or disappearance of conflicting discourses. As Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) note, this is the clearest way to study the production and evolution of discourses. The close readings were conducted alongside a review of existing literature to determine the film's reception by critics, academics and the general public. Finally, wider historical trends, such as the impact of 9/11 and its continued mediation in the decade since the attacks, were researched to determine how, if at all, real world events had contributed to the changing discourses detected in the films.

Previous research has focused on the changing nature of Muslim terrorist imagery in Hollywood pre- and post-9/11, identifying the attacks as a discursive change point. This article locates a second change point around 2007, suggesting that the discourse has undergone further evolution. Dominant pre-9/11 discourses in the films studied in this research offer no sympathy to onscreen Muslim villains: such characters are dangerous individuals driven by hatred or revenge, who do not hesitate to hurt innocent bystanders to achieve their goals. Post-9/11 attacks, the films represent young Muslim men as inherently innocent and seduced to Islamic terrorism by factors beyond their control. These characters are given a backstory of sadness and loss, always hesitating in the final moments before carrying out their deadly acts. However, from 2007 onwards, such sympathetic framings disappear in the Hollywood films examined, with characters returning to characterisations more closely aligned to those pre-9/11. Rather than acting in revenge, they are represented as acting as agents of Islamic militancy.

Dominant pre-9/11 imagery (1991-2001)

Since 9/11 there has been an understandable interest in charting the changing discourses of Hollywood terrorism, with little focus on how terrorism developed before the attacks. Vanhala (2011) addresses this deficiency by examining pre-9/11 terrorist films within the wider environment that shaped their construction. She groups her films around common filmic tropes of representation and narrative, identifying commonality in films released around the same time. Noting that "Hollywood and its cultural products are central in the creation of consensus and political mentality in society" (Vanhala, 2011, p. 3), she demonstrates how real world terrorist events, such as the fall of the Iron Curtain and the 1968 hijacking of El Al Flight 426, have shaped Hollywood's onscreen depictions of terrorism. This grouping of films around common release dates and common filmic traits allows industry trends to be identified, and the rationale behind such developments to be explored in their historic context. This paper expands on Vanhala's works, extending this type of analysis beyond 9/11, the event she uses as a sampling endpoint.

Pre-9/11 imagery of the Muslim terrorist is demonstrated in *Executive Decision* (1996, dir. Stuart Baird), where terrorist Nagi Hassan (David Suchet) hijacks a passenger plane en route to Washington to force the release of his leader. A special operations team is inserted mid-flight to regain control of the aircraft, and through Nagi's interactions with them, we observe the pre-9/11 simplistic, unsympathetic and violent imagery of Muslim villains who are driven by secular motives. This dominant imagery is likewise found in *True Lies* (1994, dir. James Cameron), where Muslim terrorist Salim Abu Aziz (Art Malik) smuggles nuclear weapons into the US, holding the country to ransom. Collectively, repeated imagery such as this, as Said (2003) notes, serves to imbue audiences with the belief that all Middle Eastern men are characterised by their love of violence and their involvement with terrorist activities.

While Nagi claims he has captured the plane for hostages, he has smuggled nerve gas on it and is planning a deadly attack on the US. His motivation is signposted through the moniker he uses during negotiations, "Al Tha'r," which is translated onscreen as Arabic for "revenge." He is not driven by religious motives, and beyond a quick glipse of his Quran, Islam is not invoked throughout the time. Learning that he plans to sacrifice the plane and all on board, his fellow terrorists accost him, arguing that "this is not Allah's will. You're blinded by hatred." Rather than religion, fighting for freedom or justice, Nagi's terrorism is driven by hatred of the West. Combined with the potential scale of destruction of his plan, little sympathy can be directed toward him.

At the film's climax, when commandos reclaim the aircraft, Nagi does not hesitate and opens fire, killing passengers and soldiers alike. In his final moments he shoots dead the pilot, dooming all on board. The violence perpetuated by Nagi is excessive, unbridled and without hesitation; no one is safe from him, not even his own men whom he kills if they stand against him. While Hollywood imagery following the 9/11 attacks features sympathetic terrorists who are prone to hesitation, pre-9/11 Hollywood Muslim terrorists are all too comfortable with violence.

Just as with Nagi, Aziz in *True Lies* (1994, dir. James Cameron) is given very little in the way of background information. Intelligence agencies profile him as "really hardcore; highly fanatical. The man's a real psycho," responsible for dozens of bombings across the globe. He started his own terrorist splinter group—Crimson Jihad—because he believed existing groups were not violent and fanatical enough. He employs torture, beats women and children, and does not hesitate when killing. This, however, is the summation of his background provided throughout the film. He has no cause, no hardship or fundamental injustice that drives him, and he is not even given a country of origin. Religious motivations are absent beyond the term jihad in his group's name. His terrorism, like that of Nagi, is framed as meaningless, excessive and unjustified.

Regardless of the text, the Middle East—a vast region of varying cultures and customs—is reduced to a singular entity, one stuck in the past and strongly linked to terrorism (Said, 2003). Rather than being granted a nuanced backstory, Muslim villains are portrayed as one dimensional and driven by revenge or anger rather than Islamic fundamentalism. Few are given a country of origin, rather they simply come from an ubiquitous and abstract "Middle East." While such Orientalist notions strongly influence both pre- and post-9/11 discourses of Muslim terrorism in Hollywood action films, this unbridled violence imbued so readily in characters prior to the 9/11 attacks is absent in similar individuals in the years after the attacks.

Sympathetic post-9/11 imagery (2001-2007)

Terrorist films released since 9/11 are a frequent topic of academic study. Pollard (Boggs and Pollard, 2006; Pollard, 2009; Pollard, 2011) has contributed significantly to this study, examining Hollywood's exploration of what he terms "the spectacle of terrorism" since 9/11. He argues that films have become more violent and realistic, seeking not to comfort audiences but to confront them (Reid, 2012). Similar studies, such as Meeuf (2006) and Dodds (2008), demonstrate that Hollywood's engagement with terrorism, particularly that hailing from the Middle East, adheres to a limited number of discursive images. However, gauging the direct discursive impact of 9/11 is problematic when not engaging with texts before the attacks.

While Pollard (2011) argues that post-9/11 cinematic terrorists are more dangerous and threatening to Western society than those pre-9/11, films released in their immediate aftermath do not fit this mould. Frequently the scale of the attacks decreased; widespread nuclear annihilation seen in *Executive Decision* (1996, dir. Stuart Baird) and *True Lies* (1994, dir. James Cameron) gives way to small-scale suicide bombings. Cinematic terrorists post-9/11 are not framed as willing participants, but rather innocent Muslim men caught in situations beyond their control and seduced to Islamic militancy.

In *Syriana* (2005, dir. Stephen Gaghan), Wasim (Mazhar Munir), an out of work Pakistani oil worker, is taken in by a Muslim cleric and indoctrinated through extremist religious interpretations to carry out a suicide attack. Similarly, in *Rendition* (2007, dir. Gavin Hood), Khalid El-Emin (Moa Khouas), a poor teenager from the local slums, is enticed by his local mosque to carry out an attack against the local chief of police who supports the CIA. Throughout both films, the Middle East is established through juxtaposition against the US as a desolate and hopeless space void of opportunity, a realm where young, innocent and down on their luck men are seduced to undertake terrorist activities to give their lives purpose. This notion of the Middle East as a primal site, unable to develop or provide a comfortable living for its inhabitants, has long been a central motif and generalisation used in Western representations of the Middle East (Said, 2003), despite the lush and pristine environments that the region holds. Wasim and Khalid are not violent and blood thirsty as pre-9/11 villains were, rather they are tragic figures of a hard upbringing, enabling a sympathetic framing to be applied to their characterisation.

The opening scenes of *Syriana*, set in the Middle East, feature solidarity figures wandering vast and barren desert landscapes attired in dirty, tattered clothes. Pakistani workers frantically crowd onto buses, desperately seeking employment to avoid deportation, and hoping to earn enough money to allow their families to join them. The film shifts to a Senator's garden in Washington, DC and then to an oil company boardroom; in both locales powerful Western men casually discuss how they steer the course of history in the Middle East from half a world away. Within minutes of the film opening, the divide between the haves (West) and the have-nots (East) is clearly established.

In *Rendition* (2007, dir. Gavin Hood), Washington, DC is positioned as a clean and ordered landscape, one lit with calming blue light, subtle autumnal colours and beautifully appointed houses. Juxtaposed against this imagery of "the American dream," Khalid lives in a garbage-filled slum among farm animals. The Middle East in *Rendition* is loud, unkempt and chaotic, with bright lighting building a barren and harsh atmosphere, evoking the common imagery of the Middle East and its inhabitants as stuck in a primal state and unable to advance (Said, 2003). According to Pomerance (2009), the desert in *Syriana* is a locale without civilisation or form, a site troubled spirits are drawn to, and such analysis could be applied to the Middle East in *Rendition*. This sense of emptiness and destitution paves the way for Wasim's and Khalid's recruitment into Islamic terrorist organisations, who take advantage of their situation to mould the innocent boys into terrorists.

Described as a "naïve, brainwashed victim" (Shaheen, 2008, p. 170), in *Syriana* Wasim is recruited into a terrorist cell in his Muslim school by a cleric who claims that, "we are all brothers; we're one family." Slowly the cleric gains his trust, teaching him to read and write so he can get a job and help his mother immigrate. Wasim remains unconvinced of this cause throughout his indoctrination, and even seconds away from carrying out his attacks, his self-doubt and hesitation are obvious, and his demeanour is resigned rather than fanatical as he triggers the explosive. Similarly, in *Rendition* Khalid, spurred on by memories of his brother who was killed by the police and his father who abandoned him, is recruited by a local mosque to conduct a suicide attack. Like Wasim, at the last moment he hesitates, forcing those running the operation to detonate his vest. For both characters, their fall to terrorism is framed with clear sympathy. Far from willing participants, both are innocent patsies seduced to carry out terrorism when their situation appears to have given them no other choice. Their seducer, as with other images of Muslim terrorists from this period, is personified Islam, a religion long generalised as being strongly linked to terrorism and conflict (Said, 2003).

Given its visual spectacle, from the moment 9/11 occurred American popular culture and mass media explored the implications of attacks for Western society (Schoop and Hill, 2009). In the wake of the attacks a concerted effort was made to not declare war on the Middle East as a whole, only the terrorist elements that inhabited it. Addressing the Congress on September 20, 2001, then-President of the US George W. Bush iterated to the Muslim world that:

> *We respect your faith… its teachings are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah. The terrorists are traitors to their own faith… The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends… Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them.*

Hollywood followed suit. Holland (2012) observes that post-9/11 Hollywood cinema has worked to create positive Muslim imagery, with Alsultany (2013) noting, "If a TV drama or Hollywood film represented an Arab or Muslim as a terrorist, then the story line usually included a 'positive' representation of an Arab or Muslim to offset the negative depiction" (p. 161). Early interrogations of 9/11 were analogical, addressing its impact through genres such as science fiction. This demonstrates hesitancy by Hollywood to directly address the events, likely out of concern that audiences would no longer find such themes palatable.

When terrorism was directly engaged with, as in *Syriana* and *Rendition*, there is an underlying current of sympathy for the terrorists who are manipulated to carry out attacks by forces beyond their control. While the depictions noted above are not strictly "positive Muslims," they are clearly delineated from the Muslim villains of pre-9/11 Hollywood who were driven by revenge or anger. Such sympatric imagery

represents the dominant framing used in the films in this study immediately after the attacks until around 2007, when a second discursive break is observed.

Return to pre-9/11 imagery (2007-2011)

Previous research in the field of Hollywood terrorist representations has focused on the differences across pre- and post-9/11 productions; this dichotomy of imagery is supported through the differing representations observed in the films examined in this paper. Few studies have sought to explore changing media representations of Muslim characters in Hollywood terrorist films both before and after the 9/11 attacks. Semmerling (2006) extends the work of Shaheen, examining six Western films produced between 1973 and 2002 to explore changing media images, though his sample is skewed toward a pre-9/11 exploration of media images, with only one post-9/11 film examined. Similarly, Prince (2007) charts the historic evolution of the terrorist film across multiple genres and in television and documentary, providing links between historical events and their impacts on Hollywood. Ivory et al. (2007) examine pre- and post-9/11 film trailers, noting the changing nature of villains and the acts they commit over time. Collectively, these longitudinal studies argue in favour of 9/11 as a change point in Hollywood representations of terrorism, noting an increase in the frequency and violence of Arab and Muslim characters.

However, rather than undergoing only one change following the attacks, this paper argues that dominant representations of these characters have undergone a more evolutionary process, with a second discursive shift around 2007. Around this time, the sympathetic positioning of Muslim villains in Hollywood action films disappears, and Muslim terrorists return to being one-dimensional characters without backgrounds, who are motivated by fundamentalist Islam. Again, we observe the melding of Middle Eastern characters into a single, unified character trope (Said, 2003).

Such representations are observed in *Body of Lies* (2008, dir. Ridley Scott), where the CIA tracks terrorist leader Al-Saleem (Alon Abutbul) across the Middle East, and *The Kingdom* (2007, dir. Peter Berg), where the FBI hunt Muslim terrorists under the leadership of Abu Hamza (Hezi Saddik) who has bombed a US housing compound in Saudi Arabia. In both films, released after 2007, the perpetrators' motivations or backgrounds are not explored as they would have been between 2001 and 2007. Rather, they are simply introduced as anti-Western villains who "want to go back in time to a purer Islam," intent on inflicting as much pain as possible on their victims (Schack, 2009), with the noted absence of the previously explored sympathetic framings found in early post-9/11 films.

The Arab peninsula in *Body of Lies* is a hive of violence and terrorism; while this is by no means an addition to the discourse and has long been a hallmark of the Middle Eastern characters in Western media (Said, 2003), the removal of the sympathies previously afforded to the inhabitants of these lands is notable. Al-Saleem's followers launch attacks in England and Europe, killing innocent bystanders. They are said to be unwilling to negotiate with the West, calmly detonating suicide vests when they are about to be captured and, unlike Wasim and Khalid, do not hesitate to kill. An informant is shot by the CIA when he is about to be captured; it is better to be killed by your own side than left in the hands of violent militants who frequently record and publicise the torture of their captives. Unlike earlier post-9/11 representations, terrorists of this era are given no sympathetic backstory or justification for carrying out their attacks, rather, they are simply motivated by fundamentalist ideologies.

Far from living in a cramped and garbage-filled hovel as Wasim and Khalid did, Al-Saleem resides in an opulent mansion, complete with plush furnishings, beautiful gardens, and a loving family. He is a man who has done well for himself, educated in some of the finest schools and universities in the West. Beyond these most basic details, however, no background is provided for Al-Saleem, and he lacks the sympathies observed in Khalid's and Wasim's stories. As with pre-9/11 imagery, and indeed dominant discourses of Orientalism (Said, 2003), Al-Saleem's lack of backstory contributes to his positioning as simply a Muslim, and nothing more. He is a mastermind of the terrorist group, and could hardly be further from the impoverished Arab youth who are manipulated into carrying out attacks as seen in earlier films. While Wasim and Khalid are the personification of the terrorist foot soldier, the young men recruited to terrorism due to their unfortunate situations, Al-Saleem is the embodiment of an Osama bin Laden-esque

character, an all-knowing terrorist mastermind who is not a victim of his circumstances but rather a willing antagonist, who describes his acts as "the punishment for a non-believer."

Again unlike Wasim and Khalid, the terrorist leader Abu Hamza in *The Kingdom* (2007, dir. Peter Berg) is a willing participant. He is given no onscreen background or justification for carrying out his attacks beyond a fundamentalist Islamic hatred for the West. Like Al-Saleem, he is surrounded by his family, but takes this one step further, engaging his sons to assist him during the attacks. A man who uses his own children in attacks while killing innocent American families is a far cry from the misguided youth who were Hollywood's Muslim villains in the years immediately following 9/11. Like Al-Saleem, Abu Hamza is a terrorist mastermind, a man fully aware of his actions and committing them without onscreen reason or justification. Unlike earlier post-9/11 Muslim terrorists, he has no redeeming qualities, no justification for what he does, and is afforded no sympathy in his representation; a clear return to pre-9/11 imagery, and indeed, dominant Western representations of the Middle East (Said, 2003).

While 9/11 had an instant impact on Hollywood, including the cancellation or delayed release of films and the editing of others to remove the World Trade Centre (Ansen et al., 2001; Bell-Metereau, 2004; Cettl, 2009; Dixon, 2004a; Markovitz, 2004), Hollywood itself was unsure how to respond. Initial explorations of terrorism were conducted through analogical genres because the events were still "too raw, too hard to grasp…an unsuitable theme for mere entertainment" (Riegler, 2011, p. 163). When terrorism was addressed, as in *Syriana* or *Rendition*, the antagonists were given backstories and justifications for their actions, typically driven by unfortunate situations and powers beyond their control. However, the emergence of this second discursive shift around 2007 is likely due simply to the passage of time; over half a decade had passed since the 9/11 attacks, giving the West and Hollywood an opportunity to come to terms with the events of that day. From this point on, terrorists in the films in this research return to doing what they did best, that is, to be self-aware and willing antagonists. Rather than being "seduced" by Islam, they are willful agents of its fundamentalist interpretation.

This continued representation of Muslim terrorists in Hollywood films as willing and active participants in acts of terrorism motivated be religion, just as with earlier images which framed them as sympathetic victims, reshapes dominant discourses around such characters in Western popular culture. These Hollywood productions operate as what Foucault terms a "surface of emergence," societal objects whose consumption and interaction creates fields of knowledge around a subject (Danaher et al., 2000; Horrocks and Jevtic, 1999). The repetition of these images in Hollywood action films constructs the notion that their content is "truth," acting on and influencing the surrounding social consciousness through the discourse's construction and dissemination, even in the absence of supporting evidence (Mills, 2004). Rather than shown as multilayered individuals with unique backgrounds, personalities and aspirations, the simplistic Hollywood imagery adheres to Said's (2003) notions of the generalisation of Middle Eastern characters, who are imbued with overwhelmingly negative traits. While this paper only examines six films across two decades, the common imagery in the films based on their release dates suggests that real world events and the public's fears have acted on and played a role in the ways Hollywood has elected to represent the character of the Muslim terrorist over the past two decades, particularly between 2001 and 2007.

Conclusion

When the Twin Towers fell on September 11, 2001, many aspects of Western society were irrevocably altered, among them, popular culture. The events of that day were unlike anything contemporary Western society had witnessed, with academics (Dixon, 2004a; Giroux, 2004; Riegler, 2011; Young, 2007) arguing that the cultural impact of the attacks split the Western world into a pre-9/11 and post-9/11 history. As previous studies have demonstrated, the nature of Muslim terrorism onscreen underwent an instant discursive change, with characters becoming more sinister and dangerous than their pre-9/11 compatriots. This article supports this assertion, but further argues that beyond this simple pre- versus post-9/11 discursive break there has been a continued evolution in the dominant imagery of the Muslim terrorist in Hollywood action films since 9/11, with a second discursive break around 2007.

Some of the first action films to explore Muslim terrorism after the attacks, *Syriana* and *Rendition* among them, created sympathetic backstories for their antagonists. Framing them as innocent individuals driven by poverty or the loss of loved ones, these young men are recruited onscreen by Muslim clerics to take up arms against the West. While their attacks are deadly, in their final moments they hesitate; they are tragic figures who easily engender sympathy. However, when sufficient time had elapsed since the attacks, from 2007 onward, such discourses disappeared and a return of the willing and unsympathetic Muslim terrorist is observed, individuals who are not seduced by Islamic fundamentalism but are rather agents of it. Herein is the final achievement of what academics have described as the transformation of the pre-9/11 terrorist into his post-9/11 self.

This study by no means is a census of all appearances of Muslim villains in Hollywood, with only six films released between 1991 and 2011 examined. Furthermore, to confirm the date of 2007 as the second discursive shift requires further research; in this study two films with vastly different representations were released in that year, suggesting that this second discursive break was not as sudden as 9/11, but rather an evolution in dominant imagery. The images of Muslim terrorists are by no means confined to Hollywood productions, and there is a need for additional research into portrayals of such characters in other mediums, such as indie/semi-independent films, television, video games and comic books. Beyond the creation of discourses examined in this paper, there is an opportunity for future research interrogating audience receptions of these images, expanding on the work of those such as Hensley (2010).

Despite continued efforts by governments to build positive relationships and images of Middle Eastern communities, Muslims are still often the antagonists in cinematic acts of violence and terrorism (Aly, 2014). While efforts by Western media to avoid victimising Middle Eastern characters in recent years has been previously explored (Alsultany, 2013; Holland, 2012), this paper represents the first time such discourses of sympathy have been explored around Muslim terrorists in Hollywood actions films following 9/11. It is hoped that this exploratory study will open up new ways of considering Muslim terrorist representations in Western popular culture, with further research needed across additional films, genres and platforms.

Acknowledgements

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