MODES OF REPRESENTATION IN AMERICAN CINEMA: FROM MASCULINITY TO MUSLIMS

Roshni Sengupta[*]

Abstract

Frederic Jameson describes cinema in terms of a "geopolitical aesthetic" (Jameson, 1991)[1]. In saying this he refers to the missionary zeal of cinema to travel far and wide, creating and spawning cultures in its wake. S Brent Plate articulates this confluence as a "georeligious aesthetic" (Plate, 2003)[2]. In fact he proposes to understand cinema as a georeligious aesthetic which has transcended boundaries and entered the lives of millions across the world. As a georeligious aesthetic, he explains, cinema is bound to religion in more ways than one. As such, films are not simply religious because of their content but also because of their *form* and *reception*. Religion is imagistic, participatory, performative, and world-creating—and more often than not it is cinema that best provides the canvas where these activities can be carried out. It is important also to note, according to Brent Plate that media and communication—of which cinema is a part—are not merely hollow, empty receptacles that connect addresser and addressee. Rather media are dynamic entities that actively shape and reshape the world and therefore wield great power. In other words, religion and cultures do not merely use the media, but instead are used by the media, and created by them.

The article analyses representational modes employed by American popular films across genres such as masculinity, race and crime, culminating in an appraisal of three films which represent the Muslim identity as depicted in Hollywood cinema.

Keywords: Muslim, terrorist, crime, race, masculinity

[*] Assistant Professor, Amity School of Liberal Arts, Amity University Haryana, India

[1] Jameson, Fredric. 1991. "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism". In *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 5. Durham: Duke University Press.

[2] Plate, S Brent (Ed.). 2003. "Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making". In *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making*, p. 1. USA: Palgrave Macmillan.

Filmmaking and mythmaking do not occur in cultural vacuums but are deeply affected by the languages, customs, beliefs, and social lives of people living in specific geographic locations and in specific times. Just as culture is encoded in media, as explained above, media shapes culture itself. Here the question of who controls the media becomes essential to answer. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue that contemporary media shapes identities, the core hypothesis of this article. Identity creation lies at the centre of the media. Shohat and Stam go on to say that by facilitating an engagement with distant peoples, the media "deterritorialize" the process of imagining communities. In this way, while media has the ability to destroy community and fashion solitude by turning spectators into atomized consuming individuals or self-entertaining monads, they can also fashion community and alternative affiliations (Shohat and Stam, 1994)[3].

Masculinity

The idea of identity formation through cinema could be situated in an uncanny but essential example of the transitions in the imagination and presentation of masculinity in British cinema in the post-War years and beyond. Andrew Spicer, in his work *Typical Men: The Representation of Masculinity in Popular British Cinema* categorizes the male character in British films as Heroes, Villains, and Fools (Spicer, 2001)[4]. While the Hero is the official, positive image of masculinity, the Fool is the comical Everyman—the unofficial hero of the film with a propensity for anarchy while he is inserted into conformist narratives. The Villain is the character who contests the authority of the state—ranging from criminals to gangsters to rebels. There is another type, that of the damaged man—someone with a fractured and flawed manhood. Spicer makes another classification, that between eras when the times changed and with times changed the imagination and representation of masculinity onscreen. In the 1920s and 1930s—the British War years—two forms were prevalent in British cinema: the hegemonic form of the debonair gentleman and the alternative, working class cheery buffoon or a comic everyman (Robert Donat and Leslie Howard in *Pimpernal Smith* [1941] and *The First of the Few* [1942]). The post-War years saw the emergence of the ordinary gentleman as the hero—the meritocratic professional (Rex Harrison in *I Live in Grosvenor Square* [1945] and Michael Wilding in *Piccadilly Incident*

---

[3] Shohat, Ella and Robert Stam. 1994. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, p. 7. London: Routledge.
[4] Spicer, Andrew. 2001. *Typical Men: The Representation of Masculinity in Popular British Cinema*, p. 25. London: I B Tauris.

[1946]). This period also saw the presentation of the male lead character as a civilian professionals such as doctors (*The Citadel* [1938]), progressive and dedicated teachers (*So Well Remembered* [1947] and *All Over the Town* [1949]), social worker (*I Believe in You* [1952]), and police detectives (*Wanted for Murder* [1946], *Dear Murderer* [1947], *It Always Rains on Sunday* [1947], *Valley of the Eagles* [1951], *Emergency Call* [1952]).

The hero as the action adventurer, modeled on the core American masculine myth of the successful and competitive individual also made an appearance around this time in British cinema—the British swashbuckler (*Caravan* [1946], *The Magic Bow* [1946], *Captain Boycott* [1947]); the imperial adventurer (*The Overlanders* [1946], *Eureka Stockade* [1949], *Bitter Springs* [1950]; the modern tough guy (*Hell Drivers* [1958], *Sea Fury* [1958]); and the tough debonair, embodied in the legend of James Bond (*Goldfinger* [1964], *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* [1969], *Diamonds are Forever* [1971]). The criminal male in the form of the gangster (*No Orchids for Miss Blandish* [1948], *Appointment with Crime* [1946], *Frightened City* [1961], *Murder in Reverse* [1945]) broke into the scene in the post-War years and has stayed since, as have the rebel males (*White Cradle Man* [1947], *A Man About the House* [1947], *Blanche Fury* [1948], *The Mark of Caine* [1948], *So Evil My Love* [1948]).

The portrayal of masculinity in cinema is taken to a new level on celluloid through the representation of black and white masculinities as obtuse and conflictual concepts (Gabbard, 2001).[5] Directed by Ron Howard in 1996, *Ransom* presents an image that powerfully symbolizes the masculine anxieties of both the hero and the film. The hero of the film, Tom Mullen, played by Mel Gibson represents the white ruling class pitted against the working class kidnappers (also white) of the his son. The racial thematics of the film function entirely apart from the narrative, but they create similarities between *Ransom* and the growing number of films in the category of the "angry white male". Not only is the white hero portrayed as a central adversary of the antagonists, his male heroics are primarily deployed against the persona of the black FBI agent who acts as the principal investigator of the crime. While the white kidnappers engage in activities that signify African-Americanness, the black, hypermasculine character—played by Delroy Lindo—acts towards protecting the interests of the American (predominantly white)

---

[5] Gabbard, Krin. 2001. "Someone is going to pay: resurgent white masculinity in Ransom". In *Masculinity: bodies, movies, culture*, edited by Peter Lehman, pp. 7-22. New York: Routledge.

middle class. The reason why the white hero feels threatened by the well-built black man is because his masculine dominance is challenged. The on-screen representation of male bonding is discernible in another 1996 film, *Sleepers* (Barry Levinson, also credited with directing predominantly male drama like *Tin Men* [1987] and *Rain Man* [1988]) (Wyatt, 2001).[6]*Sleepers* returned Levinson most directly to the line between the homosocial and the homosexual. With its tale of four street kids, now adults, seeking revenge on a guard who sexually abused them, during their childhood incarceration, the film resolutely presents gayness as other, aligning the homosexual with degradation, child rape, and violence. The close friendship between the four friends retains a homosocial, not homosexual, quality.

Marjorie Garber argues that "the All-American boy does not have a body or did not until recently…indeed it could be said that a real male cannot be embodied at all, that embodiment itself is a form of feminization" (Garber, 1992)[7]. Conversely, referring to the visual treatment of male bodies in the films of 1950s films, Steve Cohan argues that Joshua Logan's film *Picnic* (1955) "openly eroticizes William Holden's body as spectacle, configuring the possibility of an alternative masculinity" (Cohan, 1997)[8]. Further, several scholars have suggested that American cinema of the 1980s heralded an overt return to the male body as spectacle (Jeffords, 1993; Tasker, 1993)[9]. Masculinity became a pure spectacle for the consumption in narrative-starved post-modern action films populated by "hard bodies", muscle-clad male stars such as Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Bruce Willis.

Gaylyn Studlar profiles the image of actor Tom Cruise as a wholesome, virile masculine American hero, who emerged as one of the few male stars of the 1980s who sustained his top-ranked position throughout the 1990s (Studlar, 2001)[10]. She argues that while figuring a performance of masculinity as a visual spectacle might not always eroticize a male star or make

---

[6] Wyatt, Justin. 2001. "Identity, queerness, and homosocial bonding", In *Masculinity: bodies, movies, culture*, edited by Peter Lehman, pp. 51-64. New York: Routledge.

[7] Garber, Marjorie. 1992. *Vested Interests: cross dressing and cultural anxiety*. New York: Routledge.

[8] Cohan, Steve. 1997. *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

[9] Jeffords, Susan. 1993. "Can masculinity be terminated?" In *Screening the Male: exploring masculinities in Hollywood cinema*, edited by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark. New York: Routledge; Tasker, Yvonne. 1993. "Dumb Movies for Dumb People". In *Screening the Male: exploring masculinities in Hollywood cinema*, edited by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark. New York: Routledge.

[10] Studlar, Gaylyn. 2001. "Cruising into the Millennium: performative masculinity, stardom, and the All-American Boy's Body". In *Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls: gender in film at the end of the Twentieth Century*, edited by Murray Pomerance. New York: State University of New York Press.

the viewer's gaze potentially transgressive, some evidence of the transgressive quality of Cruise's screen embodiment exists extratextually as well as textually. Cruise's films emphasize the notion of male identity as performative, and at the centre of his star vehicles of the 1980s and early 1990s, meaning is anchored by the spectacle of the star's body. This fact is obvious at the beginning of a film such as *Days of Thunder* (1990), when Cruise's star entrance is via motorcycle, a pretext for full shots of his body that give ample display of him costumed in tight jeans and leather jacket.

Joe Wlodarz (2001)[11], in his work on the representation of male rape in American popular films, a sub-set of any study on the portrayal of masculinity on screen, takes a close look at the rare occurrences in films in which anal sex is actually represented. Wlodarz posits that though anal sex is visible on screen, it can be presented only as an act of rape or forcible intercourse. What is intriguing about this group of films [*The Pride of Tides* (1991); *Pulp Fiction* (1994); *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994); *Sleepers* (1996), *Your Friends and Neighbors* (1998); *American History X* (1998)] is the way in which male rape becomes symbolically coded as homosexuality despite occasional narrative attempts to avoid this dangerous collapse of meanings.

Barry Levinson's *Sleepers* presents a narrative example for the effective and elaborate representation of male rape in popular films. In order to usefully convey the horror of the atrocity that follows, the opening sequences of the film bring home the innocence and lure of a time gone by for the narrator-protagonist Shakes (Jason Patric) who talks of the "children we were", while the viewer is shown images of four friends playing basketball in a gym, bathing under a makeshift pipe shower on the streets of Hell's Kitchen, sequences that are completely devoid of any taint of sexual or psychic depravity. What is interesting about the presentation of the masculinity of the boys is that in many ways, it is updated to a more 1990s post-feminist "sensitive" masculinity. Their ostensibly pure life is brought to a rather crude end by an accident initiated by an act of juvenile madness on the part of the boys, which leads to them being incarcerated in a reform centre for boys—the site of their torture and rape by prison guards, a group led by Nokes (Kevin Bacon). The first rape segment is filmed in such a way as to highlights the boys' descent into the depths of human depravity, where the director enters and

---

[11] Wlodarz, Joe, 2001. "Rape fantasies: Hollywood and homophobia". In *Masculinity: bodies, movies, culture*, edited by Peter Lehman, pp. 67-80. New York and London: Routledge.

exists the rape scene with lengthy tracking shots down long and dark ominous tunnels that lead to the lowest point of the detention centre, the basement. The assaults however do not end here. The guards merely split up and become solo night visitors to the individual rooms of each of the boys.

Sleepers has been described by scholars like Peter Travers (1996) and J Hoberman (1996) as a deeply and powerfully unsettling film, one that lets the trauma of male rape linger in the minds of the viewers even after the film credits have started rolling[12]. Lee Edelman (1994), however, suggests that the spectacle or representation of the scene of sodomy between men is a threat to the epistemological security of the observer, particularly the male observer[13].

Race

Moving from masculinity to race, the cause for its representation in cinema remains as ambivalent. A hint of reverse racism could be evidenced in what Matthew W Hughey calls the "magical Negro" films, essentially part of the African American media. Hughey's work describes a trend of progressive, anti-racist film production (Hughey, 2009).[14] Specifically, "magical Negro" films—cinema highlighting lower-class, uneducated, and magical black characters who transform disheveled, uncultured, or broken white characters into competent people—have garnered both popular and critical acclaim. The essay examines the representation of modern racism against its rather dark predecessors reflectively in the characters of these black men and women who are constructed as both positive and progressive. Hughey terms this trend as "cinethetic racism"—a synthesis of overt manifestations of racial cooperation and egalitarianism with latent expressions of white normativity and anti-black stereotypes. However, while being relatively anti-racist compared to its predecessors, the "magical Negro" films function to marginalize black agency, empower normalized and hegemonic forms of whiteness, and glorify powerful black characters so long as they are placed in racially subservient positions. The narratives of these films, thereby subversively reaffirm the racial status quo and relations of

---

[12] Travers, Peter. 1996. "Getting away with murder". *Rolling Stone*, October 31, 75 p; Hoberman, J. 1996. "Guyland". *Village Voice*, October 29, p 45.

[13] Edelman, Lee. 1994. *Homographesis*. New York: Routledge.

[14] Hughey, Matthew W. 2009. "Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in 'Magical Negro' films". *Social Problems* 56(3): 543-577.

domination by echoing the changing and mystified forms of contemporary racism rather than serving as evidence of racial progress or a decline in the significance of race.

This paradigm is necessarily made problematic when inserting issues related to gender and power into the ongoing debate around race (Brown, 2003).[15] Most often, argues Brown, racial constructions, like those of the sexual are translated in terms of those who are typically identified as the possessors of power. These possessors of power are mostly whites and men, especially white men. Brown analyses the contents and form of two revolutionary films—*Daughters of the Dust* by Julie Dash and *The Piano* by Jane Campion—which were unorthodox. In that, not only did they challenge female subordination, they also posed a few serious questions to the preponderance of ethnocentric ideological systems. The films mythologized this subordination at the same time challenging it, indulging in what Brown terms as "sentimental progressivism". Both films therefore sentimentalized the past while engaging in its critique and revision. In both these period dramas, women are the central agents. From the feeling of spacelessness experienced by the African American woman in the country of her birth to passionate love stories revolving around a multi-ethnic cast of characters, the films represent the silencing of the indigenous characters in order to permit non-narrative women the right to speak and affirm themselves and their embattled identities.

The representation of identities assumes critical importance when extrapolated across the American-Mexican border, both in terms of celluloid and folkloric identity construction and also through authority and ideology. An example could be found in the discourse surrounding the Mexican charro (Najera-Ramirez, 1994).[16] The charro figures prominently in a variety of discourses including but not limited to film, music, folkloric dance and literature. A review of the historical conditions under which the charro symbol developed reveals a constant interplay between various social agencies that have struggled to control and fix meanings concerning "lo mexicano". The charro or the Mexican cowboy operates as a master symbol of lo mexicano in Hollywood and parallel American cinema. The year 1932 saw the production of the first charro

---

[15] Brown, Caroline. 2003. "The Representation of the Indigenous Other in *Daughters of the Dust* and *The Piano*". *NWSA Journal* 15(1): 1-19.

[16] Najera-Ramirez, Olga. 1994. "Engendering Nationalism: Identity, Discourse, and the Mexican *Charro*". *Anthropological Quarterly* 67(1): 1-14.

film in Mexico. Subsequently, the term "machismo" came to be associated with the on-screen exploits of the charro.

Henry A Giroux's (2002)[17] work on films and the culture of politics portends a bird's eye view of race relations in the United States in the 1990s, a time when "whiteness" was increasingly becoming the symbol of racial identity. Displaced from its widely understood status as an unnamed, universal moral referent, "whiteness" as a category of racial identity was appropriated by diverse conservative and right-wing groups, as well as critical scholars, as part of a wider articulation of race and difference. For a disparate group of whites, mobilized in part by the moral panic generated by right-wing attacks on immigration, race-preferential policies, and the welfare state, "whiteness" became a signifier for middle class resistance to "taxation, to the expansion of state-furnished rights of all sorts, and to integration" (Winant, 1992)[18]. From this, siege mentality arose for policing cultural boundaries and reasserting national identity. The discourse of "whiteness" as an ambivalent signifier of resentment and confusion gives expression to a mass of whites who feel victimized or bitter, while categorizing and slotting Blacks and Hispanics as dangerous, diabolical and criminal minded. Giroux lists films from a variety of genres such as *Pulp Fiction* (1995), *Just Cause* (1995), *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* (1996), and *Black and White* (2000) as portrayals that offer no apologies for employing racist language, depicting black men as drug-dealing killers, or exemplifying blacks as savage or subhuman.

Crime

The major focus in terms of representation in the crime films of the 1990s, as against its counterparts in 1970s and 1980s, is the criminal himself/herself, which is indicative of a shift away from the detective/law-enforcer element in the film (Wilson, 2000).[19] According to Ron Wilson, the decade of the 1990s in Hollywood began with the resurgence of the film noir. Neo noir films[20] such as *Mulholland Falls* (1996) and *LA Confidential* (1997) depict a world where

---

[17] Giroux, Henry R. 2002. "The Politics of Pedagogy, Gender, and Whiteness in *Dangerous Minds*". In *Breaking into the Movies: film and the culture of politics*, pp. 136-169. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers.

[18] Winant, Howard. 1992. "Amazing Grace". *Socialist Review* 75.9: 166.

[19] Wilson, Ron. 2000. "The Left-handed Form of Human Endeavour: Crime Films during the 1990s". In *Film Genre 2000: New Critical Essays*, edited by Wheeler Winston Dixon, pp. 143-159. State University of New York Press: New York.

[20] Todd Erickson in his insightful essay "Kill me Again: Movement become genre", defines neo noir as a new type of noir film, which effectively incorporates and projects the narrative and stylistic conventions of its protagonists onto a contemporary canvas. Ibid.

beneath the veneer of normalcy lies a world of vice and corruption. Both films concern the tactics of a special anti-gangster police squad who attempt to clean Los Angeles county of any unwelcome organized criminal element. While in *Mulholland Falls*, Nick Nolte is part of the "Hat Squad", so named because of the wide-brimmed hats they wear throughout the film—a vigilante force empowered to keep LA county free of mobsters, *LA Confidential* represents the omnipresent corruption and graft in the police department.

Perhaps the single most important and influential noir crime film of the decade was Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), an epic crime thriller that encapsulated nearly forty years' worth of generic crime narrative structures within the compass on one 154 minute film (Wilson, 2000)[21]. The film not only revitalized the crime genre but can also take credit for putting th4e arcane term "pulp fiction" back in the popular consciousness, and for making the term synonymous with pulp crime fiction (Woods, 1996)[22]. The film did not portray the grandiose world of a renowned Mafioso but presented the dark world of eccentrics who live in the shadowland of crime and criminals, once again a method-in-madness nonlinear storyline that aptly justified its title.

Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* (1995) is another neo-noir that takes a characteristic situation, in this case a police lineup and the subsequent interrogation of a suspect, and views it from an altogether different perspective. Starring Academy Award-winning actor Kevin Spacey in the lead role of Roger "Verbal" Kint, the film posits the nonchalance of a rather Machiavellian, cold blooded gang lord, Keyser Soze, against the ultimate revelation, which the viewer gets to witness at the end of the narrative. Not only does the revelation that Soze is none other than Kint, make for a stinging indictment of the mind of the master criminal, the epitome of evil, it represents crime and criminals as intelligent and efficient people. The film ultimately is a commentary on the elusive nature of truth itself, particularly for the viewer in this case, and utilizes the police interrogation to point out the absurdity of trying to separate fact from fiction.

---

[21] Wilson, Ron. 2000. Ibid, pp. 143-159.

[22] Woods, Paul A. 1996. *King Pulp: the world of Quentin Tarantino*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press.

The character of Kint "constructs" a shadow character all by himself, an act which is not discovered till the end of the film (Roisman, 2001)[23].

The crime-gangster film in the 1990s, as it did from its inception, provided a social commentary on American business and the American success story. Commerce in gangster films is simply illegal, much like Indian gangster films, whether it be bootlegging, racketeering, or drugs, and the gangster in these films is only protecting his own interests. Yet gangster films have always appealed to the audience on an aesthetic level, the audience here being guilty of aspiring for the gangster to become a cult-hero, even though they are aware that the character is doomed from the start (Warshow, 1962)[24]. David E Ruth suggests that the "fundamental business strategies explored by the inventors of the screen gangster were growth, consolidation, and organization…and as in legitimate business, growth was accompanied by successful attempts to limit competition" (Ruth, 1996)[25]. The "classic" gangster film narrative typically revolved around the rise and fall of the gangster hero, and highlighted the depiction of the gangsters drive towards success, which inevitably leads to failure. The 1990s gangster film, in contrast, looked at the lower echelons of the corporate ladder, or small-time hoods who also are striving for success but within a narrow perspective.

Besides the overwhelming and looming figure of the gangster, alternative criminal viewpoints have provided the subject matter for several genre films. Wilson (2000) notes the representation of the drugs subculture in the British director Danny Boyle's 1996 cult classic, *Trainspotting*[26]. The film depicts the Edinburgh drug scene from the perspective of its users, and reveals the sordidly hilarious and contemptible lifestyles of heroin addicts in their day-to-day banal existence. Also of value to the project is the representation of prisons and the existence of inmates in what is often depicted as utterly inhuman conditions, in American films. Films such as Frank Darabont's *The Shawhshank Redemption* (1994) and *Dead Man Walking* (1995)

---

[23] Roisman, Hannah M. 2001. "Verbal Odysseus: narrative strategy in *TheOdyssey* and in *The Usual Suspects*", pp, 51- 71. In *Classical myth and culture in the cinema*, edited by Martin M Winkler. New York: Oxford University Press.

[24] Warshow, Robert. 1962. *The Immediate Experience*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

[25] Ruth, David E. 1996. *Inventing the public enemy: the gangster in American culture, 1918-1934*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[26] Wilson, Ron. 2000. Op. cit, pp. 143-159.

addressed issues such as prison reforms, death-penalty ethics, and the inherent corruption of the penal institution itself.

The Shawshank Redemption is a searing commentary on the existence of corrupt prison guards and wardens who routinely abuse the human rights of prisoners for their personal gains, and the fact that the justice system tolerates such abuse, often turning a blind eye to appeals from affected prisoners. Apart from an indictment of gangs of rapists and sex abusers in prisons across America, the film also tracked the seemingly jocular procedure of granting parole to an incarcerated murderer (played by Morgan Freeman), whose appeal, rejected thus far, is accepted only as he harangues the system of crime and punishment, pokes fun at the jurors, and claims to have been sufficiently persecuted within the high walls of the Shawshank Prison. *Dead Man Walking*, based on the memoirs of Sister Helen Prejean, revolves around the efforts of a nun, Sister Helen (Susan Sarandon), who tries to appeal the death sentence of Matthew Poncelet (Sean Penn), a convicted killer awaiting execution. The nun believes that all men are redeemable, thus, establishing an emotional connect with the viewer immediately.

The thriller, unlike the crime film, seeks to create an emotional response on the part of the viewer due to the element of suspense inherent in the genre. According to Charles Derry, two of the most salient characteristics of the suspense thriller are that it is "a genre that uses thrills—which are on one level a simple depiction of danger and violence, and on a second level a vicarious psychological experience which causes anxiety in the minds of the viewers" (Derry, 1988)[27]. A sub-genre of the psychological genre is the serial killer film, which has become extremely popular as a cinematic staple since the 1990s. The serial-killer film deals almost exclusively with the pursuit of a serial killer whose motivations remain unclear throughout the film. Though several films have dealt with serial killers in the past, most notably, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), which can be seen as a progenitor of the sub-genre, and Richard Fleischer's *The Boston Strangler* (1968), filmmakers in the 1990's portrayed the serial killer in a far more compassionate light (Wilson, 2000)[28]. The treatment of the character of Hannibal Lector (Anthony Hopkins) in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) provides the best example. Although he is seen throughout the film as unspeakably evil and depraved, the film's narrative structure

---

[27] Derry, Charles. 1988. *The Suspense Thriller: Films in the shadow of Alfred Hitchcock*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company.

[28] Wilson, Ron. 2000. Op. cit, pp. 143-159.

goes so far as to allow Hannibal to escape unharmed at the film's end, promising future killings to agent Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster), who has been interviewing him throughout the film to extract information on the activities of yet another psychopathic killer.

The Muslim "terrorist" in popular American cinema

In 1996, the enigma of the Arab-Muslim terrorist was brought alive on screen by a film that pitted the collective might of the American military against a handful of highjackers aboard a 747 plane. Originally named *Executive Decision*, but released as *Critical Decision*, Stuart Baird's film posits the supra-national dream of *Dar-ul-Islam* against the profligacy of the "infidels", in this case the Americans. It is interesting to note that the narrative takes recourse to a then-fictional storyline based on the use of passenger planes as weapons of mass destruction, a premise that came alive on television screens across the world five years later as two planes rammed into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in 2001. Algerian Islamist Nagi Hassan and his group take over an Oceanic Airlines plane carrying over 400 passengers to demand the release of the leader of their "war against the infidel"—El Sayed Jaffa. The script ordains an agency for the terrorist by providing him access to a nerve gas called DZ-5, capable of wiping out the American East Coast if exposed. The plot revolves around a plan to crash the plane with the nerve gas on board in Washington, killing more than just the 400 people on the plane. American intelligence expert Dr David Grant (Kurt Russell) brings news of the nerve gas to the table in a Pentagon briefing room where the Secretary of State is standing by for a President on vacation. A counter-terrorism team is hurriedly put together which takes Dr Grant along on an experimental, newly-built aircraft called Remora, capable of transporting Navy Seals through an aerial transfer duct into the avionics room of the passenger plane. The experiment is successful even though the team loses its commander Col Austin Travis and a fellow Navy Seal is paralysed due to a fall inside the duct during the transfer. Once into the plane, the team must follow the movements of Nagi Hassan and his men who has by now secured access to the Pentagon and the Secretary of State, who fearing the worst, orders the release of Jaffa. Nagi has by now taken full control of the plane and has his men stationed in all strategic locations, including in the cockpit. Meanwhile in London, another Arab-Muslim man blows himself up inside the London Marriott, which Nagi terms a "wake up call". The counter-terrorism team by now has interspersed the plane with surveillance cameras and are monitoring the movements of the highjackers. The

technicians in the team are engaged in a bid to locate the bomb containing the nerve gas and deactivate it.

Learning of the release of his leader El Sayed Jaffa, Nagi is expected to give up the highjack, divert the plane to Algeria and release the passengers. The Arab-Muslim man here turns into the proverbial demonic character who kills his own comrade when confronted with the original plan. Nagi wants the end to arrive in a flash of glory. He is standing by for the final destination, which he calls "paradise". "This war is for Allah…we will drive this bird right into the heart of the infidel…," curiously reminiscent of what happened in reality in 2001. It now appears, in course of the narrative of the film, that the original plan devised by Nagi Hassan or as divulged to the rest of the team did not involve Algeria at all; he always wanted to drive the plane into Washington in order to release the gas and kill thousands.

The characterization and representation of the terrorist is strikingly similar to several other popular American films with villains coming from Middle Eastern or North African countries. This man is fearless; not afraid to die. He is committed to his cause, that of glory in the name of Allah. He is aware of the malafide intentions of the enemy and takes great pains to cover his tracks. He is cold and calculated, and speaks in an intonation becoming of a cold-blooded individual intent on murder and mayhem. He appears calm in all situations and is given to pulling the trigger on one of his own if rebellion threatens. He is the master of disguise. The viewer remembers the unwieldy man with the shaggy beard pulling out a bulky bag from the overhead luggage hold and carrying it to the toilet. The man who emerges from the toilet is Nagi Hassan; the beard has been replaced by a steely resolve and a gun in the waistband. He is clearly a man in control of his actions and knows exactly what he wants from the mission. He considers himself the voice of God…Allah's chosen one to take the fight to the Americans and this is the path to glory God has ordained for him. The narrative of the film presents the Algerians as a close-knit group of mercenaries who converse with each other in chaste Arabic, citing Allah's name at every instance. These are emotionless machines of death and destruction, whose only commitment is to the cause of freeing Palestine (the bomber at the London hotel says a loud prayer for the freedom of Palestine before he detonates himself); bringing desolation and death to the *Dar-ul-Harb* so that the path towards the establishment of *Dar-ul-Islam* is paved.

The Muslim here personifies the face of unparalleled evil, who in comparison to the righteous and brave American is the apostle from Hell. He drives fear into the heart of the mighty Americans and feels he can bring them to their knees in which he fails. He is defeated, but not before attempting to ruin any chances that the counter terrorism team had of securely getting the plane down at the Dulles International Airport. He kills both pilots in one round of fire in a final fit of rage, while calling out the name of God (*Alhamdullilah*) and is felled by the bullets of the stand-in commander of the Navy Seals team. This puts the safe landing of the plane in jeopardy and it is now for the amateur flying skills of Dr Grant and the helpful flight attendant Jean (Halle Berry) to take the 400 people on board the plane to safety. The manner in which the part of the Muslim terrorist is constructed from the beginning of the linear narrative engages the viewer in a way that by the end of the high-on-adrenalin highjack drama, the viewer wishes for nothing less than death for Nagi Hassan and his men as they threaten the lives of the 400 on board and thousands on the ground. The narrative has by the end of the film consumed the viewer with disgust for the cold blooded terrorist whose death will save the lives of many innocent human beings.

On the other hand, the Americans are depicted as human, who display emotions like fear, hatred, confusion, revulsion. Members of the counter terrorism team are the cowboy warriors, armed with weaponry that can put any ragtag terrorist to shame. But they are human too, afraid to die but incredibly brave men of great calibre and character. The Americans are men of steel who display nerves when confronted with danger, but emerge victorious at the end.

The construction of the identity of the Muslim here in comparison to that of the American is noteworthy. While the Muslim is viscious and revengeful, the American is humane and caring. As a comrade lies paralysed, the counter terrorism team helmed by the intelligence expert Dr Grant is not shy of seeking his help to diffuse the bomb. The engineer who is fighting against himself to get the job done is relying on the injured commando. The situation is one of camaraderie even in the face of adversity. On the other hand, the Arab-Muslim is aloof, removed from even his own men; he commands and does not seek advice; he is the overlord of his group. In an allusion to the Muslim dictators running governments in North Africa and the Middle East, the terrorist is not only dictatorial, but also murderous and is overcome by lust for glory and

power. The Oriental here is the undemocratic despot, while the Occidental is the epitome of free speech and action.

Rules of Engagement (2000) is a military drama that begins in the swamps of Vietnam and unfolds in the courtroom, as a decorated commander of the US Marine Corps, Col Terry Childers is accused of singularly gunning down 83 innocent people, mostly women and children in Yemen, as he attempts to evacuate the American Ambassador and his family from a hostage situation in the Yemeni capital. The colonel orders his troops to fire down at the crowd from a relative vantage point, ostensibly under intense fire from snipers hiding among the group. The colonel is losing men; as he does so he loses his sense of correct judgement in a combat situation and decides to take matters into his own hands. Till that point, the colonel has behaved as honourably as any decorated officer with more than 30 years of distinguished service would. As the world raises fingers against the United States for perpetrating massacres in Muslim lands, the National Security Advisor decides to destroy evidence in the form of video footage showing men firing up at the marines from the crowds. The decision to hold Col Childers singularly responsible for the massacre is taken; he is to be court-martialed on charges of actions unbecoming of a soldier and cold blooded murder, held guilty and hung out to dry, deflecting all responsibility away from the US government and its policies in the Middle East and North Africa.

The film, staying true to the stereotypical portrayal of Arab-Muslims in lands far away from mainland America, is a conservative reflection of the image of the Muslim. The Yemeni is a jihad-spouting radical with black and green flags in hand, protesting outside the home of the American ambassador. The Yemeni is a gun-wielding fanatic, an extremist with blood on his hands who does not shy away from thrusting guns into the hands of innocent children to fire at the "infidels". The film makes use of rousing audio tapes in Arabic (translated by a Yemeni doctor), which call all Muslims to *jihad*. The tapes are used in the military courtroom to suggest that the massacre was bound to happen since extremism and Islamic fundamentalism has spread its tentacles deep into the societal fabric of the country. The tapes are a tool for provocation used effectively by the film to prove that the actions of the colonel were honourable and he acted at the spur of the moment (which he probably did). However, an allusion to Islamic *jihad* and the notorious hold of radical groups on Arab-Muslim societies is surely unnecessary. The allegory is

employed in the narrative to placate and justify the actions of the US soldier who is at the end of the film reinstated as a hero. Since the tapes were not being played at the site of the protest, which preceded the massacre, it was therefore difficult to establish a direct link between what is said on the tapes and the actions of the colonel. The connection between the orders given by the colonel and the tapes is created; the makers of the film perhaps built it into the narrative to justify the acts of violence committed by the Western forces in countries they police without any direct link being established.

While it is true that the colonel acted in a fit of rage because he was losing men, the film again posits the violent and barbaric enemy, the Arab-Muslim against the heroic and brave American soldier. The stealth of the Arab extremists is postulated against the disciplined and honourable actions of the US army. The Arab-Muslim is the degenerate criminal, terrorist, and blood-thirsty radical, while the US marine is the upright upholder of justice and freedom, who knows the "rules of engagement", but uses his own judgement to silence the snipers firing up at his men who are being hunted down.

The narrative of this film however chooses not to exonerate the civilian US government for its diplomacy paux pas' committed all over the world while holding a beacon for the US army and its men. The military procedures are portrayed as no-nonsense, strict processes where justice is the ultimate end. But the military too is captive at the hands of the civilian government, which is using this opportunity (the massacre of 83 people in a foreign land) to clean up its image in the eyes of the rest of the world, especially the Muslim world.

Katherine Bigelow's Academy Award-winning film, *The Hurt Locker* (2008) is set in the backdrop of the US occupation of Iraq and documents the duties and responsibilities of US army explosive ordinance device (EOD) disposal squads patrolling the streets everyday in the country. The elaborate procedure of disabling both sophisticated and crude explosives is depicted in graphic detail, with the risk involved being exaggerated manifold to drive home the impact. The film is a simple story of a three-man EOD team led by Sergeant William James, a rather curiously fearless bomb disposal expert who "takes risks because he does not think about them". He is the quintessential American cowboy, the man on a mission, who throws back his shoulders, pops a cigarette in his mouth and goes about his duties mechanically, exactly the way in which the US military would expect any young soldier to behave during the discharge of his duties. As

such, the film, which uses the technique of silence leading to an impact sequence brilliantly, at any given time, could be used as a recruitment video for the US armed forces.

James is a man with a heart of gold who offers cigarettes to the suspicious Iraqi extremist sympathizer who attempts to flee the sight of a possible explosion, which James has successfully averted; befriends a young Iraqi teenager who sells DVDs to American soldiers and calls himself Beckam only to find him butchered by Iraqi extremists with high intensity explosives placed in his stomach; and passes along a packet of ration juice to his mate who is keeping an eye out for terrorists who have just ambushed a group of British mercenaries. He is the epitome of the American military dream, the perfect soldier. He is also a man with beset with his own insecurities and fears who tries to placate his mate who laments his life as a soldier in a foreign land. James is the model soldier who returns to disable more bombs and serve his country honourably even as men around him die in desperate circumstances.

The Americans are the providers of justice to a land run over by dictators and despots. *The Hurt Locker* is a study in contrast of the manner in which non-Caucasian cultures and people are demonized as butchers and barbarians. The Iraqis are desperate people calling out for American help. The film posits the invasion and occupation of Iraq as a matter-of-fact, routine act carried out by the American army who has been given the mandate of protecting all of humanity. The Iraqis are faceless, inhuman beings who are intent on murder and mayhem. Not only do they not understand the language of the foreigner, they apprise him with suspicion, which spurs them to act against him making use of various forms of violence. The innocent Iraqi man with explosives tied around him crying out for American help is the defining point of the narrative of the film. As the good American soldier bursts into the house of an Iraqi doctor demanding to see Beckam, his young Iraqi friend, the doctor's wife drives him out of the house shouting expletives in Arabic— another instance of the rather intentional demonizing of the backward, barbaric Iraqi.

The focal references of the film make for a rather studied reading of the manner in which American films portray or represent the "enemy"—in most cases the Arab-Muslim. The neo-conservative representation is marvelously and flawlessly sewn into the narrative of the film. As in most of the cases, the Arab-Muslim is portrayed as a human being with suspicious temperament, given to acts of degenerate violence and barbarity, leading from the fact that the

Islamic faith calls for mindless violence against the infidel West. The factors responsible for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the Muslim world are not examined.

It is noticeable that the exposition on the terminology and definition of "terrorist" and "terrorism" have pointed towards several descriptive aspects. Following from a large section of the writings quoted, we can arrive at our own definition of a terrorist. A terrorist is an individual who in his own individual capacity or as part of an organization or political formation indulges in political violence against his/her own state or authority or across modern sovereign boundaries under the influence of radical political thought or otherwise. This definition predicates the notion of "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter/revolutionary" in the foreground. Interestingly, this reading of the nature of a terrorist does not take religious indoctrination as a given.

References

Jameson, Fredric. 1991. "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism". In *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 5. Durham: Duke University Press.

Plate, S Brent (Ed.). 2003. "Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making". In *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making*, p. 1. USA: Palgrave Macmillan.

Shohat, Ella and Robert Stam. 1994. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, p. 7. London: Routledge.

Spicer, Andrew. 2001. *Typical Men: The Representation of Masculinity in Popular British Cinema*, p. 25. London: I B Tauris.

Gabbard, Krin. 2001. "Someone is going to pay: resurgent white masculinity in Ransom". In *Masculinity: bodies, movies, culture*, edited by Peter Lehman, pp. 7-22. New York: Routledge.

Wyatt, Justin. 2001. "Identity, queerness, and homosocial bonding", In *Masculinity: bodies, movies, culture*, edited by Peter Lehman, pp. 51-64. New York: Routledge.

Garber, Marjorie. 1992. *Vested Interests: cross dressing and cultural anxiety*. New York: Routledge.

Cohan, Steve. 1997. *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Jeffords, Susan. 1993. "Can masculinity be terminated?" In *Screening the Male: exploring masculinities in Hollywood cinema*, edited by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark. New York: Routledge

Tasker, Yvonne. 1993. "Dumb Movies for Dumb People". In *Screening the Male: exploring masculinities in Hollywood cinema, edited by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark*. New York: Routledge.

Studlar, Gaylyn. 2001. "Cruising into the Millennium: performative masculinity, stardom, and the All-American Boy's Body". In *Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls: gender in film at the end of the Twentieth Century*, edited by Murray Pomerance. New York: State University of New York Press.

Wlodarz, Joe, 2001. "Rape fantasies: Hollywood and homophobia". In *Masculinity: bodies, movies, culture*, edited by Peter Lehman, pp. 67-80. New York and London: Routledge.

Travers, Peter. 1996. "Getting away with murder". *Rolling Stone*, October 31, 75 p;

Hoberman, J. 1996. "Guyland". *Village Voice*, October 29, p 45.

Edelman, Lee. 1994. *Homographesis*. New York: Routledge.

Hughey, Matthew W. 2009. "Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in 'Magical Negro' films". *Social Problems* 56(3): 543-577.

Brown, Caroline. 2003. "The Representation of the Indigenous Other in *Daughters of the Dust* and *The Piano*". *NWSA Journal* 15(1): 1-19.

Najera-Ramirez, Olga. 1994. "Engendering Nationalism: Identity, Discourse, and the Mexican Charro". *Anthropological Quarterly* 67(1): 1-14.

Giroux, Henry R. 2002. "The Politics of Pedagogy, Gender, and Whiteness in Dangerous Minds". In *Breaking into the Movies: film and the culture of politics*, pp. 136-169. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers.

Winant, Howard. 1992. "Amazing Grace". *Socialist Review* 75.9: 166.

Wilson, Ron. 2000. "The Left-handed Form of Human Endeavour: Crime Films during the 1990s". In *Film Genre 2000: New Critical Essays*, edited by Wheeler Winston Dixon, pp. 143-159. State University of New York Press: New York.

Woods, Paul A. 1996. *King Pulp: the world of Quentin Tarantino*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press.

Roisman, Hannah M. 2001. "Verbal Odysseus: narrative strategy in The Odyssey and in The Usual Suspects", pp, 51- 71. In *Classical myth and culture in the cinema*, edited by Martin M Winkler. New York: Oxford University Press.

Warshow, Robert. 1962. *The Immediate Experience*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Ruth, David E. 1996. *Inventing the public enemy: the gangster in American culture, 1918-1934*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Derry, Charles. 1988. *The Suspense Thriller: Films in the shadow of Alfred Hitchcock*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company.