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YOU'RE EITHER WITH US OR AGAINST US": POSTCOLONIALITY, SPECTATORSHIP AND THE MILLENNIAL HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

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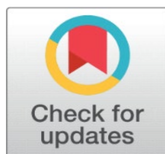

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ABSTRACT

Hollywood has a special knack for genre films. The historical thrillers of the recent times, unlike those of the past, put the third world in an Orientalist imagination, as a problematic location where the evil is dancing. The cases in target are historical rescue dramas – Argo (2012) and Captain Phillips (2013). Both are texts, among many other movies, which represent the paranoid fear of the third world that exists in the imperialist American(ized) psyche. As Stam and Spence note, the texts produce "aberrant readings" in the third world spectator/s. The paper attempts to problematize the concept of spectatorship by challenging the theories of representation. The theories of spectator positioning, by Metz and Mulvey, ignore or at least do not consider the flesh and blood of the living spectator. Thus, the ideal(ized) spectator is a myth, and s/he is rooted in a historical continuum and material present so that the readings are all influenced by co-texts from the rest of the world – cinematic as well as non-cinematic. The exemplars analyzed in the paper are the videotapes by IS which produce a counter-aberrant reading in the spectators. The films are contested from the viewpoint of Neoimperial and counterimperial discourses in which how historical narratives are often viewed through the lens of contemporary ideology, reinforcing the cultural hegemony of dominant groups. The paper also attempts to redefine the concept of empire from a Neoimperialist perspective and contests the monolithic understanding of postcolonialism based on presentism.

Keywords: Hollywood, Orientalism, Imperialism, Spectatorship, Ideology, Hegemony, Neoimperialism

1. INTRODUCTION

Hollywood historical thrillers have had a history of providing striking portrayals of the past, people in captivity, rescue missions, mission impossibles, with the USSR or beings from the rest of the world as villains. (Meanwhile the sci-fi fantasies followed another narrative pattern of the eternal clash between good and evil, America and its citizens being good and the aliens bad.) For decades, it appeared as though Hollywood cinema was the symbolic wish fulfillment of America's staunchest advocates of white supremacy. The movies often begin with visuals of the American flag triumphantly displayed in the air (Saving Private Ryan), and end with when the heterosexual lovers lock their lips each other with the reassurance offered by flag in presence and absence (Total Recall). The spectators are happy as the enemy of the state is killed by the muscular, intelligent, civilized white (wo)man by what film critics call 'Hollywood endings'. The magic of Hollywood which lies in Americanizing the spectator, however, is problematized once the ideological underpinnings of the imaginary spectator are interrogated. The paper argues that the colonial and Orientalist mythmaking in mainstream Hollywood complicates the impartial watching of Hollywood movies, especially based on real life events set in the third world, at least for spectators from there. It also counter-argues that parallel narratives from the third world by the extremist groups through videotapes and facebook postings complicate the theory of misrepresentation. This ambivalence redefines the spectator, as s/he is a material continuum that really exists in the world than an artificially born "theory-child". The cases in target are historical rescue dramas – Argo (2012) and Captain

Phillips (2013). As David Holloway concluded, these films displayed "a conventional Hollywood preference for stories about individuals caught up in contentious historical events, rather than stories about historical events themselves" (86).

Argo, produced by Time Warner and directed by Ben Affleck, narrates the undercover rescue of six USA diplomats from Tehran during the tense 1979 Iranian Hostage Crisis. The dire situation of the fifty-two hostages taken from the US Embassy captivated the world's attention while six secretly escaped to the house of the Canadian Ambassador. A joint effort from the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), headed by Tony Mendez (Ben Affleck) and the Canadian government succeeded in their endeavor, returning the six back home safely and covertly. The movie follows the preparations for the making of a fake movie called Argo to successfully carry out the rescue mission. The rationale of the missions: first, had the state not intervened, it would have spoiled America domestically with the message that the Americans are vulnerable in the third world. Second, had the mission failed, not only were lives at stake, but it would have damaged the USA and Canada internationally.

In the 2009 Maersk Alabama hijacking, the historical text of Captain Phillips, the situation also had international stakes, but not nearly as palpable. The lives of the crew including Captain Phillips (Tom Hanks) were certainly at stake; however, it began a new precedence. Until then, a United States ship had not been seized by pirates since 1815. Had the pirates been successful in reaping any bounty from their mission, it would create a mindset in their people that would lead to many more ship captures. The film narrates how the US navy intervenes and how the Americans – 'the pride of the earth' - are saved from the Somalian sea pirates, - 'the wretched other'. This (historical) fiction is the base of Paul Greengrass' movie produced by the industrial giant Columbia pictures.

Are these Hollywood texts, like many more from the recent years, the "imperialist narrativization of history" (244) as Gayatri Spivak would put it? Is postcolonial film criticism a monolithic engagement with imperialism and film as raw material? Is the spectator idealized according to theoretical codes and, therefore, totally alienated from history? These are the questions the paper would attempt to address (not to offer a solution but to problematize further).

The theories of Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey foreground Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis in the construction of spectatorship. The spectator is, as in the mirror stage, identifies himself with his ideal ego – the heroes are so idealized according to the dominant symbolic order – projected on the screen.

[I]t is an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence of the first articulation of the I, of subjectivity. This is a moment when an older fascination with looking … collides with the initial inklings of self-awareness. Hence it is the birth of the long love affair/despair between image and self-image which has found such intensity of expression in film and such joyous recognition in the cinema audience. (Mulvey 18)

In the Hollywood flicks, the hero turns out to be a white ideal(ized) American who is essentially heterosexual, patriotic and family-centric. In Captain Phillips, the spectators throughout the globe give sanctity to the commando operation to rescue the captain because he is essentially one who belongs to the patriarchal order, positioned on the right side of law as a family man. He loves his wife, children and through them the grand narrative of "America". He is evidently heterosexual: had he been homosexual, the narrative would have suggested so. The same is the vantage point for Tony Mendez of Argo, as he is reunited with his (estranged) wife at the end of the mission. The emblematic concluding image is the one where they embrace each other with the American flag in the background. Though, the Hollywood superheroes expose corruption, contamination and setbacks of the system as in Bourne Ultimatum (2007), the myth of a liberal, democratic and ethically upright nation stays unquestioned. These narratives act as the cultural equivalent of the famous television speech on the aftermath of 9/11 by the then President George W. Bush: "You're either with us or against us."

However, there is historical and political sanction to such operations in view of recent political developments. The rise of IS (or ISIS?) and other extremist groups resorting to terror forces even the politically correct spectator to reread and readjust one's positions. The theory of representation is in serious danger as the nature of the very process is challenged. The central question is whether representation is totally subjective, without any historical base. Post 9/11 discourses of the west start to renounce theory and naturally the misrepresentation hypotheseis is in crisis.

Critics like Dodds argued, by citing Weber, that Bush himself has also used films such as Kandahar (2001) to explain and legitimate his decision to intervene in Afghanistan on the basis of seeking, among other things, to improve the condition of women under the repressive Taliban administration. Well, the discourses that pose challenges to the theories of representation, here, are non-illusionistic in nature. Thus, the location called spectator is artificially made

than naturally existing. Klaus Dodds adds that "film audiences are active producers of meaning, even while the patterns of engagement can be strongly shaped by, among other things, the generic qualities of movies" (1634).

The psychoanalytic theories of Metz and Mulvey fail to address the colonial baggage of spectatorship. The people of the colonies, on watching the Hollywood metanarratives of hegemonic power question the logic of American power especially when his lifelike turns to be the villain. It challenges the unproblematic identification with the hero aforementioned. It is in this context that the concept of "aberrant readings, readings that against the grain of the discourse" (888) by Robert Stam and Louis Spence becomes an ideological tool in film criticism. The Hollywood utopian texts, that supply ideal image to the Americanized spectator, offer an absolutely different cultural text to the Iranians, Somalis and the rest of the world. In the post-9/11 context, such productions of meanings assume multiple significations.

However, an aberrant reading emerges from the co-texts of violence, though without a structured narrative. Argo and Captain Phillips may text an empire of lawlessness, anarchy and mob power which exists in the paranoid American(ized) psyche. This fear of the other is logically sanctioned with the videotexts of cold-blooded murder and other things. This is the point of the death of the ideal spectator and the birth of a really existing material one.

While the religion Islam is not explicitly positioned as villainous and problematic, the references in the texts are quite clear in their intended connotation for the spectator. The obvious interpretation of these texts draws on Huntington's (1993) "clash of civilizations" thesis. He argues that "the dangerous clashes of the future are likely to arise from the interaction of Western arrogance, Islamic intolerance, and Sinic assertiveness" (183). The post 9/11 (un)conscious of these texts posits the deep text that the villains are third world Muslims or the reverse: in Argo, the Islamist republic of Iran and in Captain Phillips individuals of a state demographically dominated by Islam. Thus, while American actions in the past may have caused friction, the conflict itself is an inevitable result of incompatible cultures: a secular democratic federation versus an orthodox religious Republic. Islam, in particular, is given as an example of a civilization innately tied to religious violence in the Orientalist mythmaking. The repeated visuals of the fearsome mob chanting in Arab in the streets against America, "the Satan", and the prayer "Allahu Akbar" in the background signifies at least that the (religious) other is violent and dangerous. Derek Gregory discusses the semiotics how such images and sound:

In the wake of September 11, this imaginative geography helped to define and mobilize a series of publics within which popular assent to-indeed, a demand for war assumed immense power. For many commentators, the attack on America was indeed a "clash of civilizations".... Although he [Huntington] now connected the rise of Islamicism to the repressions of domestic governments and the repercussions of US foreign policy in the Middle East, other commentators used Huntington's repeated characterizations of Muslims and "Muslim wars" to degrade the very idea of Islam as a civilization. (58)

Understanding war in the terms of state-to-state conflict, the Second World War model, or even in its updated version the Gulf war of 1991, severely limits the understanding of warfare to a matter of pitched battles between large armies. If 9/11 was an instance of actual war mediated by images, these movies are soft wars: both are ultimately hegemonic. The global political text of these wars is that when the United States is engaged in a hard war in Iraq and Afghanistan, Hollywood performs its part by such soft narratives of power. Public trauma enabled the Bush administration to generate a pervasive fear of terrorism, which supported worldwide expansion of American power and led to such policies as the preemptive invasion of Iraq, the detention and torture of war prisoners, and increasing indifference to the attitudes of important former allies like Germany and France. So goes the story for imperial control over the globe by the taming of the other.

Investigating the history of American power, the central question is: what exactly is the conduct of the US empire? It can be conceptualized in various ways, including George W Bush's empire of "hard power," Clinton's empire of "soft power," and the Cold War-era client state system. Still, in all cases, "the actually existing American empire was acquired ... not in a fit of absent-mindedness (as the British liked to claim), but in a state of denial: imperial actions on the part of the US were not to be talked of as such, nor were they allowed to have any ramifications for the domestic situation" (Harvey 6). The events of 9/11, a "revolt in the provinces" in Simon Dalby's formulation, were "about political theatre, dramatic gestures, and ... the willingness to resist in the face of ridiculous odds." (80) Thus, the War on Terror is not a new type of war, but instead, as he continues, "counter-insurgency warfare at the fringes of imperial control" (80). Dalby is arguing for a reconsideration of the geographic underpinnings of current events in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere where US troops are committed. Rather than the territorialized conception of a violated America, the events of 9/11 should be put into an imperial context, one masked by America's tendency not to territorialize the empire itself. "The

resulting 'Empire of Disorder' allows American national identity to maintain its anti-imperial rationalizations while committing troops to garrison duties and counter-insurgency operations in many places" (Dalby 82).

The role of popular culture in constructing selfhood has increasingly become the subject of much critical inquiry. At the centre of popular culture's importance to the construction of national and global identity is Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Hegemony which is estimated as the basis of strong national government, is predicated on consensus, as contrasted with coercion, which Gramsci perceives as the last resort of weak governments. Terry Eagleton summarizes how Gramsci defines hegemony "to mean the ways in which a governing power wins consent to its rule from those it subjugates" (112). These ideas, similar to what Louis Althusser calls the ideological state apparatus, are employed successfully by the modern democracies to interpellate people. Though the Italian philosopher was writing in the context of a Marxist revolution, his ideas resonate strongly with capitalist formulations of nationhood as well. Sharp in Condensing the Cold War: Reader's Digest and American Identity (2000) however, uses Gramsci's idea of hegemony to insert a space for popular culture in the literature of nationalism and identity:

[H]egemony is constructed not only through political ideologies but also, more immediately, through detailed scripting of some of the most ordinary and mundane aspects of everyday life. Gramsci's concept of hegemony posits a significant place for popular culture in any attempt to understand the workings of society because of the very everydayness and apparently nonconflictual nature of such productions. Any political analysis of the operation of dominance must take full account of the role of institutions of popular culture in the complex milieu that ensures the reproduction of cultural (and thus political) norms. (31)

Gramsci's concept of hegemony is not static, but instead, as Adamson argues in Hegemony and Revolution "a process of continual creation that, given its massive scale, is bound to be uneven in the degree of legitimacy it commands and to leave some room for antagonistic cultural expressions to develop" (174). Thus, hegemonic constructions and their antagonists are in need of continual buttressing by active agents, in this case, the producers of popular culture.

Argo positions the spectator in the American perspective almost unproblamatically through the diegesis. When the hostages are rescued by the intelligent "bad ideas" of the CIA agent Tony Mendez, the camera registers the troubled Iran and feeds the spectators with apparent objectivity via long shots and the employment of aerial shots. On the other hand, Captain Phillips is a subjective rendering of the incident from the point of view of the captured captain of the US ship. Visuals recorded through handheld cameras give the image of the captive in the lifeboat, which could be contrasted with the deployment of shots in Cast Away (2000) and Life of Pi (2012). The employment of long shots in the scenes prior to the hijacking of the ships signifies the myth of western, if not American, monopoly over the global waters. But, once Captain Phillips becomes a prisoner with the Somali pirates inside the ship and later in the lifeboat, the camera operates very differently focusing the inside of the lifeboat and the characters. Background scores of both the movies heighten the adrenaline level of the spectator, as it is customary to thriller genre.

Edward Said states in Culture and Imperialism (1993), "just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings" (7). This paper has illustrated the political relevance of films like Captain Phillips and Argo and used them as post-9/11 texts to signify what America semiotically informs: the meaning of America and how that idea is rescaled to the individual spectator through territorial symbols, and the construction of a dominant American geopolitical narrative. Thus, such texts not only define what America is, but they also firmly ensconce the spectator within its geography. The spectator, tacitly assumed to be American, is reminded of his/her individual identity as an American and is told what that means in relation to the rest of the world. Stuart Aitken summarizes it up in the article entitled "Tuning the Self: City Space and SF Horror Movie" so: "The astonishing acceptance of [this] iconography as an important part of our societal character raises questions regarding not only the content of myth but also its power" (105).

The stereotyped definitions and strategies of postcolonialism need a revision to highlight the way in which all such readings are undone. For, the empire does not always refer to Europe and America alone. As Graham Good points out, "non-European examples of imperialism like the Islamic conquests in Africa and India, Japanese annexations of Korea and parts of China, the Chinese invasion of Tibet, or the Indonesian invasion of East Timor" (291) must also be in contention. Argo, in particular, is about the formation of another empire based on religious fundamentalism. The videos of the killings of Daniel Pearl of Washington Post, Steven Sotloff and James Foley disseminate the presence of a similar empire. As postcolonial studies ignore all other forms of colonization other than the two mentioned above, any analysis of discursive practices has only a single climax, like the Hollywood formulaic flicks. In this sense, Argo is not merely a

historical fiction, but a presentist history with at least two readings: a critique of the US empire and a critique of the other empire. Though Captain Phillips does not project an empire as the villain, it is an "allegory lite" of contemporary politics. It works on the spectator not as a text in isolation, but with the contemporary cinematic and non-cinematic discourses, popular and academic enterprises.

When subjected to postcolonial readings, these films demand "the spectator is unwittingly sutured into a colonialist perspective" (Stam 886). The exteriority and otherness of the third world citizens, as Stam and Spence argue, necessitates the possibility of 'aberrant readings' as a counter-strategy. Though Captain Phillips employs a few shots of the Somalis and offers them a history unlike villains in traditional movies, the displaced racism of Europe is very much evident. The idealized spectator ultimately sympathizes with Captain Phillips, the American middle class man who represents the American dream and laments over the future of his family. The poverty of Somalia and other Afro-Asian nations are given a sympathetic look, but the narrative always shows empathy with the American in captivity.

To conclude, there is no single, uniformed and idealized spectator. The spectator is a continuously evolved reality with a past and a future. The movie hall is not a closed space, either; but extended to the outside to all the other texts – newspaper and television reports, paintings, books, memoirs, film reviews, documentaries, youtube videos, facebook comments and so on. Therefore, any monistic aberrant reading proposed at the present undergoes alterations and in the process counter-aberrant readings are produced. The 'I' who watches these movies, if has a history, is a very intriguing site that is constantly refashioning itself. What is needed, the argument concludes, is a cinematic awareness that can illuminate all imperialist underpinnings of narratives as popular culture is inseparable from material history, multiple forms of textuality and (present) global politics.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

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None

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