

*Cinematic Representations of Terrorism: Analyzing Hollywood's Role in Shaping
Public Perceptions Through "True Lies"*

التمثيلات السينمائية للإرهاب: تحليل دور هوليوود في تشكيل تصورات الجمهور من خلال فيلم
"أكاذيب حقيقية"

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of Hollywood cinema in shaping public perceptions of terrorism, focusing on the 1994 film "True Lies" as a case study. Hollywood's portrayal of Middle Eastern characters as terrorists reflects and perpetuates stereotypes, reinforcing Western biases. The paper argues that such cinematic representations contribute to ideological framing, influencing public opinion and policy by presenting certain ethnic groups predominantly as threats. Drawing on this, the study examines the film's narrative and visual strategies, highlighting the cultural and political contexts that inform these portrayals. This research contributes to understanding the interplay between media, war, and artistic representation, exploring how media both reflects and constructs societal fears during conflict.

Keywords: Cinematic representations; Hollywood; Orientalism; Stereotypes; Terrorism.

ملخص

يستكشف هذا البحث دور السينما في هوليوود في تشكيل تصورات الجمهور للإرهاب، مع التركيز على فيلم أكاذيب حقيقية لعام 1994 كدراسة حالة. يعكس تصوير هوليوود للشخصيات الشرق أوسطية على أنها إرهابية ويعزز الصور النمطية ويعمق التحيزات الغربية. يزعم البحث أن مثل هذه التمثيلات السينمائية تساهم في التأطير الإيديولوجي، مما يؤثر على الرأي العام والسياسات من خلال تقديم مجموعات عرقية معينة بشكل أساسي على أنها تهديدات. بتحليل الاستراتيجيات السردية والبصرية للفيلم، يسلط البحث الضوء على السياقات الثقافية والسياسية التي تشكل هذه التصورات، مساهمًا في فهم التفاعل بين الإعلام، الحرب، والتمثيل الفني أثناء الصراع. كلمات مفتاحية: التمثيلات السينمائية؛ هوليوود؛ الاستشراق؛ الصور النمطية؛ الإرهاب.

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1- Introduction

Terrorism as a concept has come to light since the French Revolution and academic research on terrorists has been in place for more than thirty years. However, the subject is far from being fully understood and digested regardless of whether it is being discussed in written texts or on screens. Accordingly, the present paper attempts to discuss the concept of terrorism in cinema since it is widely known that cinematic representations including films play a significant role in people's perception of events surrounding them. This echoes Altheide's words who states "It is widely believed that popular culture and films in particular occupy an important position in people's understanding of events" (2006, p.420). Thus, in today's world, it is clear that Hollywood represents a cultural medium in need of investigation in order to understand how certain historical events may produce and shape the images associated with terrorism. In other words, Hollywood has become a key ground for the mediation of acts of terror and the social changes they bring about. Accordingly, the present paper will draw on James Cameron's 1994 film "True Lies" as a case study for analyzing the way cinematic representations of certain groups of people may enforce the stereotypical images associated with them as either terrorists or heroes.

2- Methods

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Given the power of mass media and entertainment platforms such as films, to influence public opinion, it is important to analyze the context of the cinematic representations of the characters in the film due to the following reasons: First, checking the historical period and the surrounding atmosphere in which the representations take place. Second, deciding on whether these representations are valid/correct or not. Such motives could help reach the purpose behind such representations. Thus, the present research will try to trace the cinematic representations employed in the film "True Lies" 1994 by James Cameron in order to highlight the way Eastern characters vs. Western characters are presented in the film by tracing the signs they show in the film, such as their behavior, their speech, their costumes, etc., and figure out what these signs could indicate. Accordingly, this paper will draw on the work of Edward W. Said, and his seminal piece *Orientalism*, in particular, published in 1978. Said's work represents a model that seeks to examine both Western and Arab political and cultural establishments, by drawing particular attention to the often misleading representations and interactions between the two which were not representative of what Said had experienced/witnessed as an Arab.

2.2. The Portrayal of the East vs. the West

It is important to highlight that Said conducts his examination of Orientalism through a close study of historical texts. Said identifies the repeated themes/ideas that have been carried down through the ages in those texts (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 2009, p.49). In other words, before Said's work, the Western reader is not introduced directly to the Orient but rather to the existing discourse of the Orient that is repeated through the work of a particular author. However, Said's notion of the Orient covers the Middle East, and South Asia and also extends to India and North Africa.

One of the key elements of Orientalism as a concept is the creation of imagery that locates the East (Orient) and the West (Occident) as polar opposites to one another, resulting in an 'us' and 'them' relationship through associating positive connotations with the West and negative connotations with the East (Kennedy, 2000, p.17, p.57). In other words, the Eastern world of the 'Orient' has been constructed by the Western eye as a place of wonder, mystery, and the fearful unknown. Such imagery reinforces the binary opposites between the East as savage and the righteous West. This results in the establishment of a negative 'them' and a positive 'us' from a Western perspective. Accordingly, in today's world, this affects the way both the East and the West are being presented in cinema. In other words, a dichotomy of primitiveness and advancement is established on screen between the terrorists and counter-terrorists respectively with visual cues employed to support the Orientalist notion that the Middle East is a region stuck in a primitive state of being, unable to modernize, change, develop or progress, on the other side, there is the West that stands in opposition to this set of negative connotations.

2.3. The Relationship between Media and Terrorism

Since mass media and entertainment platforms such as films have the power to influence public opinion, it is important to pay attention to their content and the way the characters are presented on screen if one wants to correct the misleading images established by the West about the East in their cinematic representation. This echoes Reid's words "Cinematic representations of Arab terrorism and counter-terrorism within Hollywood is a field of study to which little literature currently belongs, despite its obvious importance as a medium capable of structuring individual's beliefs as to the nature of such world-changing events" (2013, p.44). In other words, the representations of Arab characters in media texts are usually guided by the discourse of Orientalism, which links the characters with a series of negative tropes, images, and connotations. Thus, the present paper claims that the character of the Arab terrorist examined in this study of the film "True Lies" 1994 adheres to such imagery of the Orient since the Eastern characters in the film are represented as lacking intelligence, capable of inflicting harm on others since they are ready to resort to violence to achieve

their goals. Moreover, the present paper claims that since the movie was produced before the events of 9/11, the representation of characters is communicated with the audience through comedy and laugh-out-loud moments based on Pollard's (2011) perspective who believes that post 9/11 terrorists are represented as more dangerous than those of pre 9/11 in cinema. In other words, drawing on the Orientalist framework as outlined by Edward Said, this paper examines how images of Arab terrorism are created through the lens of the West and how these representations relate to real-world events. Thus, this paper will compare the onscreen representations of Arab terrorists and counter-terrorists/Western characters in the Hollywood action film "True Lies" in 1994.

3- Results and Discussion

3.1. Hollywood Films: Analysis of "True Lies" 1994 as a Model

"True Lies" 1994 is a significant material within the discourse of Hollywood terrorist films since the film won numerous industry awards, including those for special effects and a Golden Globe for Jamie Lee Curtis, who played Harry's wife. The film was used in video games launched across four platforms. Moreover, "True Lies" 1994 was critically praised upon release. For example, Prince argues that "True Lies" is seen to anticipate 9/11, and that this 'predictive insight' merits close academic attention (2009, p.19, p.51). In addition, Boggs & Pollard term it the "quintessential 1990s Hollywood counterterrorism fare" (2006, p.340). However, it is regarded by Jack Shaheen (2001) as one of the worst films in history due to its portrayal of Middle Eastern individuals. Such reasons of commercial success and academic controversy make the examination of the onscreen representation of the Arab villains/terrorists important.

In other words, "True Lies" 1994 stands as a successful example of the representation of Arab terrorists when discussing Arab terrorist discourse in the West, on the one hand, and as an example of the terrorist discourse before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, on the other hand. A period that is characterized by terrorists who pose a threat to America but this threat remains inactive due to their fanatical and foolish behavior. For example, during this pre-9/11 period, Shaheen states: "Terrorists are linked to attacks utilizing aircraft hijackings or nuclear ordinance, with a precedent for their attacks to be carried out on United States soil" (2001, p.17). This statement assures that those pre-9/11 villains still represent the norms of the Arab terrorist discourse in that they are represented in cinema as addicted to both violence and Islam. In addition, their cinematic representations reinforce their lack of intelligence. Such representations could be traced in "True Lies" 1994 where the whole story revolves around Arab terrorists who smuggle nuclear weapons into the United States with the aim of putting the country under threat. Known as Crimson Jihad and led by Salem Abu Aziz, the team plans to explode the weapons in major US cities unless the country withdraws its troops from

the Middle East. Opposing them is Harry Tasker who plays the role of a government agent from 'The Omega Sector', which stands as a secretive counter-terrorist agency. Despite the fearful depiction of Crimson Jihad as radical terrorists, their cinematic representations work to lessen the threat they possess through the employment of funny moments or comic relief.

In accordance with the images prevalent in Hollywood Arab terrorist discourse, the terrorists in "True Lies" 1994 are represented onscreen as being highly aggressive and motivated by religion. For example, during a briefing, Aziz is described as being "really hardcore, highly fanatical, the man's a real psycho", with Harry asking a Crimson Jihad associate later: "Why are you helping these raving psychotics?" The audience came to know that Aziz was responsible for a series of deadly fatal bombings and that he founded Crimson Jihad because the existing terrorist groups were not enough to water his blood lust. Aziz and his group are shown to fire randomly into crowds and at news reporters and are preparing to kill two million residents in Miami as part of their plot. Such scenes represent the characters as capable of violence, suggesting a common link between acts of murder and a Middle Eastern image, with such violence established as a product of their religious beliefs. The group refers to their nuclear weapons as "a mighty sword" to attack their enemies with "a pillar of holy fire that will light up the skies", arousing religious feelings. Members of Crimson Jihad state that they are willing to die for their cause with Aziz himself depicted as especially extremist in his devotion.

Moreover, the notion of Arabs as being primitive and simple is clearly noticeable in "True Lies" 1994. The Arab terrorists in the film block themselves in a variety of simple, foolish, and unprofessional ways which successfully work to lessen the threat they pose to Western society. When Harry's profession is discovered early in the film, Crimson Jihad makes a failed and comical attempt to assassinate him. Two terrorists who try to follow Harry's car, Harry nicknames them Beavis and Butt-Head, are spotted. They are led into a nearby bathroom, and despite being unarmed, Harry quickly fights them and flushes their heads in the bathroom, arousing the imagery of what usually happens between school students who bully less intelligent/weak students. Aziz later joins the battle and makes the scene less threatening and more comic at the same time; he is unable to shoot Harry or even his partner despite the latter hiding behind a thin iron lamp post for protection. The only life Aziz claims is when he shoots a fellow terrorist, this short scene early in the film helps to emphasize the notion of a foolish, slow-witted Arab terrorist, a common theme when talking about the cinematic representations of the Orient by the Occident.

The cinematic imagery of the Arab terrorist as someone possessing inferior intelligence is a common trait in Hollywood representations especially in the historical period prior to 9/11 where the events in "True Lies" 1994 take place. Scenes displaying the incompetence of the figure of the

Arab terrorist are repeated throughout the film. For example, such incompetence becomes obviously clear when the Members of Crimson Jihad cannot use the camera, they are unaware of the fact that they need to recharge the battery of the camera they are using to shoot a propaganda film. In addition, the rush and clumsy behavior of the Arab terrorists when they are threatened, they choose to escape and avoid confrontation. This is clear in the film when the guards are fooled by fake accents and distracted outright with minimal noise while Harry is attempting to get inside the party to gather some information. Despite Harry taking a moment to explain to his enemies the exact plan he is about to execute when threatened, these represented as terrorists panic and cowardly yell using the Arabic word "Yallah, Yallah! (Hurry, hurry!)" as they run away. However, on the Occident side represented by Harry, it is clear that the Arab terrorist and Harry stand in opposition to one another since Harry remains cool as he politely asks bystanders to move out of his way. This emphasizes the image of the Arab terrorist who is incompetent with his weapons (Vanhala, 2011, p.237). He is unable to shoot Harry and his allies but is quite capable of killing his Arab brothers/ allies.

Moreover, a lack of foresight, skill, and discipline is evident within the Arab characters in the film. The film producers resort to inserting a lens that flares into a number of shots to give the impression of Arab terrorists as amateurs. These lens flares function to give the impression that the environment within which the terrorist groups operate has been poorly organized and planned out. These flares appear clearly in the scene at the Florida Keys hideout, where the shots that contain Crimson Jihad members are recorded in a shaky, quivering manner with frequent and noticeable lens flaring. By contrast, despite being in the same room, images of Harry and his wife are stable, steady, and better framed. Thus, when used in conjunction with the common comic traits associated with the Arab terrorist figure, these cinematic effects of flaring give the Arab villains an amateur appearance and actively work to reduce the threat they pose, constructing them as undisciplined, savage, unintelligent, and primitive.

The above representations of the scenes that contain the Arab terrorists support what Shaheen has argued that the Arab terrorists of "True Lies" 1994 are represented "as blundering dunces" (2001, p.501) and Prince agrees with this assessment, stating that such pre 9/11 terrorists are cartoonish characters and "a mostly daft lot-loonies, crackpots" (2009, p.50). In addition, Cettl states that such images are derived from Hollywood's "desire to humiliate those it regards as unworthy" (2008, p.266). However, it is important to shed light on the Occident figure, represented by Harry and the way his image is being created. In other words, the scenes in "True Lies" 1994 show that the antagonist who is represented by Aziz stands in an inferior position compared with the protagonist Harry in every possible chance. This echoes Vanhala's words who states "Despite his scary looks and threats, Aziz is a very inefficient terrorist" (2011, p.240). This statement is best manifested in the film's final scenes where Aziz and Harry do a battle on top of a fighter jet, the fight between them

ends when Aziz becomes entangled in one of the plane's rockets. Accordingly, Harry sends off the missile and fires at the helicopter trying to rescue Aziz. Harry has the final say in the fight by informing Aziz that "You're fired". This scene is a moment of pure comedy; the once-frightening Aziz is transformed into a laughing stock by the Western hero and positioned as not posing a threat to the Occident world.

Those scenes present in the film fall in the comedic elements since the audience is presented with villains who panic and scream the moment a protagonist enters the battlefield. This image reinforces the long-upheld belief of Oriental discourses that Arab characters are fools and they act without thinking. In other words, on the surface level, those cinematic terrorists are represented as a serious, viable threat, yet these cinematic terrorists on the deep level, are disarmed and portrayed as ineffective through their childlike actions and bumbling. This echoes Vanhala's words which state that jokes and comedy in films ... undermine the threat posed by the onscreen terrorists (2011, p.242). Accordingly, through these filmic elements, the threat/ danger the Arab terrorist is capable of committing is viewed as incomplete and not serious since the events take place before the 9/11 attacks where terrorism was not taken seriously if compared with after the 9/11 attacks.

3.2. The Representation of the Western Protagonist

A close examination of the representation of Harry reveals that he is being represented positively compared with the on-screen image of Arab terrorist figures such as Aziz. In other words, Harry is being represented positively through three dimensions and he is successful in playing all three roles: a US secretive agent, a caring husband, and a protective father. In other words, Harry is presented as a professional person in his job as a secretive agent. He is represented as a good and caring husband doing his best to keep his family safe and united and he appears as a good father, doing his best to save his daughter's life by risking his life and his career reputation.

In the first dimension, Harry is viewed as a clever person who can balance both his personal life and his professional career. He is able to hide his career from his wife for several years without being discovered. He is presented as an intelligent person who is capable of not leaving any trace or mistake behind him in every mission he undergoes. In addition, Harry is working for the sake of protecting his country from the threat of the Arab terrorist. He indulges in his mission to the extent that he learns the language of the Orient, for example, Harry uses some Arabic phrases in the film. He could communicate with the Orient figures using Arabic, the language of the Arab terrorists. Moreover, Harry is presented as a character who can play different roles and change his outfits according to the situation. He is a good dancer and leader and he has a good memory since he was able to fly a plane even though he did not practice doing this job for several years. He knows how to

deal with technology since he was able to use the glasses to trap the people who were following him. On the other hand, Arab figures, like Aziz, always appear in clothes that show they are ready to attack and target US cities. The Arab figures appear in nearly the same clothes, style, and the same colors. Thus, "True Lies" 1994 exaggerates the way the Occident figure is presented as highly superior compared with the Orient/ Arab figures.

In the second dimension, as part of his role as a husband, Harry is represented as a caring husband who does his best to keep his family united. Even though when he realizes that his wife might be cheating on him, he manages to solve this problem by trapping her in a confession room where he and his assistant interrogate her. Even though Harry benefited from his position to take confessions from his wife, he was not punished or viewed as a guilty person. He was torturing his wife by keeping her in a room alone, putting her on the spot, making her the center of attention, sitting her on a stool with no back to rest on which is an uncomfortable situation, gazing at her from behind a mirrored window and using sound effects to distract her attention and threatening her to admit whether she has an affair with another man or not. In this situation, Harry the husband affected his wife since she was responsive to his questions and she went on to reveal her wishes and needs from her husband. She is the one who is being noticed, exposed, and put in a weak position. Her husband could see her and every move she makes but she cannot recognize him because there is a curtain between them. The situation is exactly like a theater where the final say is for the director who usually stays behind the scenes. He is addressing the questions to her from behind the mirror and she is acting accordingly by answering the questions. Thus, in this terrifying scene, Harry is viewed as the romantic figure who is trying to take care of his wife and no one could blame him for that since he is doing this for the sake of keeping his family united. On the other hand, the film does not expose the private life of any of the Arab figures. The film does not show any details about their personal life, whether they are married or not, have children or not. The film focuses only on the aspect of their life as terrorists and does not reveal any familial aspect about them. It represents them as individuals who lust for violence capable of inflicting harm on innocent people and are not social. They appear as individuals who are devoid of their emotions toward their surroundings. Their loyalty is only for their party members to support the terrorist attacks and is not related to any kind of human feelings. This is the opposite of the case with Harry. There is a kind of unbalance regarding the representation of the familial life of both the Orient and the Occident where the Orient is associated with blind loyalty while the Occident is linked with honesty and caring.

In the third dimension, Harry appears as the sacrificing father who does his best to rescue his daughter from danger. The transformation of his character from being an ignorant father to a caring one represents Harry in a positive way since he finally recognizes his duties as a father. He risks his reputation as a US agent and takes the flight from the team who was about to embark on a mission

for the US government and manages to save his daughter's life from death. This emphasizes the positive image of the Occident father unlike Aziz who was trying to inflict harm and even kill Harry's daughter despite she is still young and honest. This emphasizes the Orient as a violent, emotionless, and blind figure.

4- Conclusion

The representations of the Orient figure in "True Lies" emphasize three common images that can be inferred from the cinematic discourse in the film. These images support the notions of: First, the Arab world and its inhabitants are backward and primitive compared to the Western world even though the film is ignorant since it does not show any Arab geography or place throughout the whole film. Second, there is a strong link between Islam, established onscreen as anti-Western, and the motivation of those who engage in terrorist activities is associated with individuals seduced by the teaching of the faith. The belief that the Middle East is a site of perpetual violence and that violence is planted into the mentality of those who were raised in the region. In addition, since "True Lies" 1994 was produced in the decade prior to the 9/11 attacks; the threat of Arab terrorists in the film was often undone through comedic performance, lessening the perceived threat they posed to Western society.

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