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## Examining the Critical Role American Popular Film Continues to Play in Maintaining the Muslim Terrorist Image, Post 9/11

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## Examining the Critical Role American Popular Film Continues to Play in Maintaining the Muslim Terrorist Image, Post 9/11

### Abstract

This article was delivered as a paper at the 2015 International Conference on Religion and Film in Istanbul, Turkey.

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### Author Notes

Rubina (Ruby) Ramji is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Cape Breton University. After serving as a Chair of the Religion, Film and Visual Culture Group for the American Academy of Religion and then on the steering committee, Rubina continues to serve on the Executive Committee for the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion as President and is the Film Review Editor of the Journal of Religion and Film. Her research activities focus on the areas of religion, media and identity, religion in Canada, and religion and immigration.

The “truth” of Islam in the way it is portrayed and distributed through popular movies is flawed in that it offers a homogeneous and monolithic understanding, essentializing the discourse on religion. This rhetoric of normativity becomes even more problematic when trying to understand a religion in a multicultural context. Rather than resigning oneself to the fact that it may be impossible to teach what Islam is through film, or pondering whether the term exists, one might be able to use alternative and competing narratives in film to emphasize cleavages in authoritative knowledge. Religious essentialism can be also questioned in the context of immigration – new worlds within the story-world of “Islam”. Instead of focusing on one general or “mainstream” understanding about the authenticity of Islam, multicultural perspectives on Islam allow for a multiplicity of narratives about the intertextual understanding of what Islam is (or is not) and what a Muslim is (or is not). Unfortunately, popular film in America has essentialized Islam by creating a western notion of what Islam is (or isn’t).

Although it has been argued that Immigrant Muslims in America have become demonized as a national security threat since 9/11, this demonization and “otherness” has existed for quite some time. Muslim communities and families face bias crimes, sweeping arrests, popular and media hostility and official assumptions of “guilt by association.” For decades, the West has viewed Islam as violent, confrontational, and barbaric. This fear of Islam, traced through historical conflict between Christians and Muslims, has been transmitted through generations by literature, folklore, academic writings, and now film.

American cinema has, for the past one hundred years, offered up the image of Islam and the portrayal of Muslims in different, yet for the most part negative, ways. It has used images to construct sentiment, to strengthen attachment, and to promote replication, and it has reproduced its relationship to the Orient in an ever-changing progression (Miles 1996: 10). It has espoused

the cultural assumptions on which Orientalism is founded. In early films, such as *The Unfaithful Odalisque* (1900), *The Palace of Arabian Nights* (1905), *The Arab* (1915), *The Sheikh* (1921), *The Desert Song* (1929) and *Thief of Damascus* (1952), the world of Islam was depicted as mysterious and exotic, filled with images of bejewelled, yet, veiled women in harems, bearded sheikhs and dark-skinned villains living in places in the desert landscapes surrounded by palm trees and camels. But the mysterious and exotic do not necessarily promote a positive image (Ramji 2005).

In the early 1900s, American films embellished the portrayals of the Arab caricatures written about by the Europeans. In mythic Arabia, bearded Arabs rode camels in the desert, waved swords, killed each other and coveted Western heroines. Women were kept in harems and belly danced in revealing clothing. These old stereotypes have been replaced with new ones. The sheik and lusty despot have slowly disappeared, leaving hijackers, kidnapers and terrorists. Muslim women have disappeared behind the chador and burqa (Picherit-Duthler and Yunis 2011).

The Arab Muslim male is portrayed as a backward and undeveloped heathen. American film, in its projection of Arabs, consistently associates “Arab” with “Islam”, thus all Arabs are Muslims and all Muslims are Arabs. American film does not usually offer depictions of Muslims as Indonesian, Malaysian or Pakistani, countries that have the highest Muslim populations. Even though approximately fifteen percent of all Arabs are Muslim, the two become one in American cinema. Muslims in American films speak Arabic, invoke the name of Allah and wear specifically Middle Eastern clothing: in the case of women one sees the burqa (Afghanistani) or the chador (Iranian) and the men usually wear the kafeyah (checkered scarf associated with Palestine). American cinema

has created a homogeneous concept of what a Muslim is, and what a Muslim extremist is – he is an Arab (Shaheen 2001).

Since the late 1970s, Muslims/Arabs have become identified with terrorism; and Islam has come to be understood as a radically militant religion at war with the West, especially the United States. The Islamic threat narrative has become a constant imagination of impending terrorism on the Hollywood silver screen. *Into the Night* (1985) and *Iron Eagle* (1986) portrayed Arab Muslims as terrorists, as ruthless killers threatening the American way of life. These movies were seen as tools to “help the American public accept preparations for going to war against them [Arabs]” (Solomon 1996). Also in 1986, the US action thriller *The Delta Force*<sup>1</sup> was released, starring Chuck Norris and Lee Marvin. Stolen from headline news, the storyline was about the hijacking of an American Travelways (ATW) Boeing 707 airliner jetliner by Lebanese terrorists, based on the actual events of hijacking of TWA flight 847 by the Hezbollah in 1985.<sup>2</sup> The film referenced the original American military’s hostage attempt to free the hostages in the Iranian embassy in Tehran, thereby linking the story line of the film with historical events and giving it a sense of realism. The terrorist threat was visibly defined as ‘Muslim’ in the Iranian hostage taking. They are suspicious looking dark skinned men who speak Arabic. Diverting from the historical truth, the Delta Force dispatched to kill the terrorists and rescue the hostages in the movie are triumphant, thereby creating a hyper-reality<sup>3</sup> where the dominant Americans always save the day. This image becomes a “floating signifier” in the movies, because it has no real connection to concrete or original events (Baudrillard 1983). A heroic America becomes the simulation which is but a

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<sup>1</sup> *The Delta Force* (1986) was produced and entirely filmed in Israel. It was directed by Menahem Golan.

<sup>2</sup> The plane hijacking that took place in 1985 by the Hizbollah lasted seventeen days and the news media showed daily images of hooded hijackers holding guns on innocent Americans.

<sup>3</sup> In this sense, hyper-reality refers to Jean Baudrillard’s explanation of the hyperreal in media simulations. He states that “simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.” As cited in Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 2.

reflection of reality, and in itself, becomes “real” for the viewer. The role that American movies have taken, which illustrate Muslim characters, authenticates the concept that Muslims are terrorists and the religion of Islam is the root cause of these acts.<sup>4</sup>

In American film, there have been a handful of films that depict Muslims in a positive light, because they are accepting and accommodating. The movie *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991) takes place in the twelfth century. Robin Hood (Kevin Costner) a prisoner in an Ottoman jail, escapes and rescues a Muslim Moor, Azeem (Morgan Freeman) who vows to help Robin Hood, stating “you saved my life Christian. I will stay with you until I have saved yours.” *The Thirteenth Warrior* (1999), based on Michael Crichton’s 1976 novel *Eaters of the Dead*, is set in the tenth century. Ahmed Ibn Fahdlan (Antonio Banderas) is thrown out of Baghdad for desiring another man’s woman. He and his courier Melehisidek (Omar Sharif) encounter a landed ship of “Northmen” (Nordic warriors). While spending the evening with them, the Northmen are beckoned to help a northland village which is being attacked by an “ancient evil.” Thirteen warriors are needed, and Ahmed is chosen as the thirteenth warrior, who fights valiantly alongside the Northmen. *Three Kings* and *The Siege* also offer up a few positive Muslim male characters, but both have been Americanized, and in a sense are considered rare. The good Muslim character in Hollywood films is the westernized Muslim. It is the good Muslim who aids the Americans in fighting the evil Muslims. Yet, these exceptions only reinforce the rule that in general, the Muslim characters are indeed bad. See: *Navy Seals* (1990), *The Sheltering Sky* (1990), *Not Without My Daughter* (1991), *True Lies* (1994), *Air Force One* (1997), and *Black Hawk Down* (2001).

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<sup>4</sup> These movies have been further analyzed in the article by Rubina Ramji, “From Navy Seals to The Siege: Getting to Know the Muslim Terrorist, Hollywood Style,” in *Journal of Religion and Film*, 9:2, 2005.

### *The Immigrant Muslim outside American Cinema*

Films representing Muslims from different geographical regions can offer the multiplicity of voices required to illustrate the idea of authority versus belief and performance. In Canada, the concept of “religious accommodation” has been raised to determine whether certain actions fit into the “Canadian” value system. The belief that some behaviours are not considered “Canadian” because of their foreignness has risen to the forefront in response to multicultural rhetoric. The move to ban the burqa in France and the wearing of the hijab in Quebec and Britain, the restriction on building minarets in Switzerland and other negative reactions that are directed towards “Muslim” practices calls to question as to whether a multicultural society is itself essentializing and reductionistic.

In Europe, the problematic relationship of Islam versus America is not as clear cut. Many European countries have close ties with Muslim countries, therefore immigration has cast the focus on Muslims in movies to the role of family. From its earliest days, the British film market was saturated with English speaking movies from the United States. Under these conditions, the industry was restrained from producing films that reflected British culture (Auty and Roddick 1985: 5). Beginning in the 1980s, both American and British Cinema began including the portrayal of the Muslim as one of the leading characters in popular film, but with very divergent attributes. In British cinema, the issue of personal identity and community identity has begun to play a large role in the images portrayed. With an increase in immigration, the 1970s represented a period of second generation immigrants growing up in England. It was this generation that began producing literature and film that reflected their British as well as traditional identities. The 1990s saw an

increase in movies being made by Asian immigrants about East Asian and Muslim families adjusting to life in the United Kingdom. Films such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (UK 1985), *My Son the Fanatic*, (UK, 1997) and *East is East* (UK, 1999) explore the stories of immigrant life and the harsh realities of living with racism and tradition. *My Son the Fanatic* was not considered a box-office success, but nevertheless received wide audiences when screened on television. *East is East*, on the other hand, was considered one of the most successful British films of the decade, grossing more than £10 million at the box-office (Stafford 2002).

The screenwriter, Hanif Kureishi, is a son of a Pakistani father and a British mother, who challenges traditional British standards about race, sexuality and class. “He found himself observing the assimilation of Asians and other Blacks and foreigners into British society, while some newcomers in the Muslim community became attracted to religion and fundamentalism,” a confrontation deeply examined in the movie *My Son the Fanatic* (Larsson 2001). Two other movies which included themes of Muslim identity in British culture were extrapolated from stories written by Kureishi. *My Beautiful Laundrette* explores issues of being Asian, gay and straight in English society, by telling the story of a young Muslim Pakistani immigrant (Gordon Warneke) who opens a laundromat with his white, gay lover (Daniel Day Lewis). Although praised by reviewers in England, it was met with protests on the American side by some Pakistani organizations such as the Pakistan Action Front in New York because they felt that a character of Pakistani origin was held representative of the whole Pakistani community, and therefore should display a positive stereotype to American and British audiences.



In the film *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, Kureishi examines the life of a racially mixed couple living in London during the race riots. Sammy (Ayub Khan Din) is an accountant who has an open marriage with his wife Rosie (Frances Barber). When Sammy's father Rafi (Shashi Kapoor) makes a visit, Sammy finds that he has to reconcile his Muslim family duties with his progressive attitudes. In *My Son the Fanatic*, Parvez (Om Puri) is an immigrant father who has lived in England for twenty five years driving a taxi to support his family. When his son Farid (Akbar Kurtha) becomes a Muslim fundamentalist, rejects acculturation and invites a Muslim leader to stay in his home, Parvez finds that he cannot understand his son's behaviour. The film *East is East* explores the lives of a Muslim Pakistani immigrant, his English wife and their seven children. Based on the autobiographical play by Ayub Khan-Din, it tells the story of Khan-Din's life experiences growing up in a bicultural, working-class family. The film offers competing views of Muslim tradition versus western values through the generation gap of the first and second generation immigrant members of this family (Ramji 2013).

British national culture still retains traces of an imperial mentality that saw the white British as a superior race and reveals itself in projected fantasies and fears about difference, and in racialized stereotypes of otherness (Johnson 2002). Although many of these films offer a negative view of Islamic fundamentalism (especially those written by Hanif Kureishi<sup>5</sup>), they are capable of exploring the relationships between people, and offer an idea of what it means to live as a Muslim

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<sup>5</sup>Hanif Kureishi states that fundamentalism, like racism, is a diminisher of life. "Islamic fundamentalism is a mixture of slogans and resentment; it works well as a system of authority that constrains desire, but it strangles this source of human life too. But of course in the Islamic states, as in the West, there are plenty of dissenters and quibblers, and those hungry for mental and political freedom. These essential debates can only take place within a culture; they are what a culture is, and they demonstrate how culture opposes the domination of either materialism or puritanism. If both racism and fundamentalism are diminishers of life - reducing others to abstractions - the effort of culture must be to keep others alive by describing and celebrating their intricacy, by seeing that this is not only of value but of necessity." This text originally appeared in the introduction to Hanif Kureishi, *Collected Screenplays* (UK: Faber and Faber, 2002).

minority within a country where identity plays such a large part of integration and inclusiveness (Ramji 2013).

An examination of films with Muslim immigrant themes in European film has evolved in Scandinavia as well (Sjö 2013). Around 2000, several thematically similar films were released that focused on young second-generation immigrants trying to integrate into Scandinavian society, while balancing parental traditions. Sjö found that in these films, “tradition usually gives in to the “Nordic way of life,” with religion as a private matter that does not have too much of an influence on life in general” (2013: 9). These films include Reza Bagher’s *Wings of Glass* (2000), a movie about a young woman caught between her desire for independence in contrast to her family’s expectations.<sup>6</sup>

Although diverse images of Muslims are seen in Scandinavian films, negative images also exist there. “Young Muslim men in particular are often represented as violent and oppressive of women” (Sjö 2013: 20). Of importance to note is the fact that most of the Scandinavian films that focus on Islam are actually being directed or written by Muslim filmmakers or scriptwriters.

But the question remains: how are Muslims now portrayed in American film, especially after 9/11? Jack Shaheen (2009) states that he is hopeful that changes are actually under way. In his study he notes that a number of Arab-American or Muslim-American directors, such as Annemarie Jacir (*Salt of the Sea* 2008), Jackie Salloum (*Slingshot Hip Hop* 2008), and Rolla Selbak (*Three Veils* 2009), Alain Zaloum (*David and Fatima* 2008), Ahmad Zahra (*American East* 2007) and Cherien Dabis (*Amreeka* 2009) are offering diverse and crucial representations of Islam in film.

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<sup>6</sup> These movies are further analyzed in the article by Rubina Ramji, “Muslims in the Movies,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Religion and Film*, Ed., William Blizek, Bloomsbury: London, 2013

### *American Films After 9/11*

After 9/11, many North Americans turned to popular media outlets to better “understand” the religion of Islam and the terrorist motivations of these Muslims. Instead of illustrating a highly diversified Islam, these outlets seemed to merely confirm the existing stereotypes. Canadian video stores recorded a huge surge in rentals of movies featuring violent terrorist attacks on Americans after the September 11th tragedy. *The Siege* (1998), a movie depicting Muslims terrorists attacking New York City, was ranked third on the list of top selling DVDs. *True Lies*, a 1994 movie starring Arnold Schwarzenegger as a U.S. agent battling an Islamic terrorist group called Crimson Jihad, ranked fifth. *Air Force One*, a 1997 movie about an Islamic terrorist’s hijacking of the American president’s plane, was rented ten times more frequently than before the attacks. A spokesperson for one of the largest video chains in Canada, Rogers Video, maintained that people were perhaps searching for insights into the events and the minds of the terrorists, seeking similarities and speculating whether the attackers had received their ideas for the terrorist acts from a Hollywood plot (Ramji 2005).

An examination of nine hundred American films containing images of Muslims (up until 2001) found that only five percent (approximately 50 movies) of these films deflated the image of Islam and Muslims as barbaric. The popular Arabs were adorable, romanticized cartoon characters such as Aladdin, Ali Baba, and Sinbad. The “Muslim woman” was rarely illustrated as compassionate and heroic. In general, most films depict women either as silent, shapeless bundles under black garbs or as eroticized, enchantingly veiled belly dancers (Shaheen 2001: 8). The images of women, mostly covered and silenced by their black veils, do not take into account the

variety of fashion that exists in “Islamic” countries nor the idea that gender itself is a cultural construct. Not all women living in countries claiming to be Islamic wear burqas, black cloaks and veils, but the images given by Hollywood offer only one homogenous, truncated image, a woman who is alienated from the Western world, silenced and oppressed by the ordinances of her religion (Ramji 2005). Therefore, when I teach a course on Islam, I am not surprised when my students voice opinions about the barbarity and oppressiveness of Islam as a religion.

The three most popular pre-9/11 movies with the characteristic Muslim “bad men” were *Delta Force* (1986, with Chuck Norris, which made \$17 million), *The Siege* (1998, with Denzel Washington and Bruce Willis, which made \$116 million), and *Rules of Engagement* (2000, with Samuel Jackson, which made \$71 million). Even films that were extremely popular, where viewers don’t remember who the “bad guy” was exactly, included Muslim villains: in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981, which made \$389 million), the Egyptians were depicted as Nazi sympathizers; and, in *Back to the Future* (1985, which made \$389 million), Arab terrorists tried to shoot Michael J. Fox.

After 2001, the theme of the Muslim terrorist continued to be profitable at the box office: *Syriana* (2005), starring George Clooney and Matt Damon, had multiple Muslim stereotypes: the rich Arab billionaire, the Muslim fundamentalist terrorist, and the traitor mercenary. Yet *Syriana* offered a slightly more complex understanding of America versus Islam. In this instance, it focused on how a corrupt American government used its military ability to make a profit. Also, it did illustrate different ethnic groups, making a distinction between Iranians, Pakistanis (who are seduced by the Islamic fundamentalist) and Arabs

(it should be noted that Jack Shaheen considers *Syriana* to be a Hollywood film that offers humane, equitable images of Arabs and Muslims).

*Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), starring Orlando Bloom, Jeremy Irons, Liam Neeson and Ed Norton, was praised by the American-Arab Anti Discrimination Committee (ADC) of its portrayal of Arabs and Muslims because of its complexity. Rather than portraying simplistic images, the movie highlighted the similarities between Muslims and Christians, as well as offered a range of personalities and characters. Furthermore, *Kingdom of Heaven* was commended for offering a positive portrayal of Saladin. At the same time, it could be argued that the religious characters were often portrayed as fanatics or fools. Even *Iron Man* (2008) has terrorist Muslims killing young American soldiers (and killing themselves).

Yet the positive or “normal” Muslim character seems to have made a comeback in independent films, written or directed mostly by Muslims. *Towelhead* (2007), starring Aaron Eckhart and Toni Collette was originally a novel written by Arab-American Alicia Erian. The film takes place during the first Gulf War, as anti-Arab sentiments were on the rise in the United States. Jasira is a young, beautiful and “exotic” looking girl who lives in Syracuse with her Irish-American mother. Because her mother becomes jealous of her daughter’s sexuality, she sends her to live with her Lebanese Christian father in suburban Houston. *Towelhead* is filled with sexual, political, racial and ethnic tensions. Jasira is growing up, and her father does not deal with it well. Meanwhile, her boyfriend and her adult neighbour both prey on her vulnerabilities. *Towelhead* is a movie that forces the viewer to be uncomfortable. It highlights what life is like for a young Arab teenager living in America, surrounded by racism and ethnic slurs hurled at her from the perspective of hate. Yet it also offers a more balanced representation of different faiths and ethnicities in America.

*American East* (2008), starring Tony Shaloub, examines issues of a Muslim community in the United States, and the culture clashes they encounter with Jewish American communities. It also offers a realistic examination of intergenerational issues between Arab immigrants and their children who were raised in America. It offers the multicultural world in which immigrant children are being raised in and how they handle parental traditions in a new homeland.

*Traitor* (2008, Paramount), co-written by comedian Steve Martin and director Jeffrey Nachmanoff, deals with terrorism, but also offers a somewhat positive view on the origins and resolution of terrorism. Don Cheadle plays Samir Horn, a Sudanese born CIA Black Ops agent, who is on a deep undercover mission as an Islamic extremist bomb maker to infiltrate an international terrorist organization. Only one government supervisor knows his true identity. Samir is portrayed as a devout Muslim, praying five times a day, fasting and abstaining from alcohol.

The terrorist group wishes to activate sleeper agents, seemingly ordinary Americans who are in fact terrorists, to carry out a massive scale, simultaneous suicide bombing spree on 50 separate buses. *Traitor* tells the story from the perspective of the Muslim agent, whose allegiance is doubted. No one knows if Samir will be loyal to his Muslim "brothers", whether he is so deeply undercover that he will actually carry out the attacks, or be loyal to the American government employing him, while at the same time it is pursuing him as a terrorist. The most damning aspect of the movie is the depiction of the sleeper agents, because they are depicted as assimilated Muslim Americans, unassuming businessmen, fathers, and college students, all willing to end their lives for the suicide mission. For those American viewers who know little of Islam, the fear and suspicion they have of terrorists now can move to their neighbours, people who have gone

about their lives but now must be scrutinized more closely. Don Cheadle's character, Samir, also adds to this mistrust of Muslims, as it's unclear whether he can carry out his noble objective or be lost to the lure and whims of terrorists.

*Body of Lies* (2008, Warner Brothers) is also an action-spy movie about jihadi terrorists directed by Ridley Scott (who made *Kingdom of Heaven* in 2005). It is also a star-studded film, with performances by Leonardo DiCaprio, Russell Crowe and Mark Strong. It takes place in the Middle East, and follows the CIA and Jordanian Intelligence as they try to apprehend a jihadist known as "al-Saleem." Al-Saleem is elusive and hard to catch. The different methods used by a CIA operative, Roger Ferris (Leonardo DiCaprio), his superior Ed Hoffman (Russell Crowe), and the head of Jordanian Intelligence causes conflict to arise. The film examines the tension between Western and Arab societies and the effectiveness of technological (unmanned drone surveillance) versus human counter-intelligence methods. The film was shot largely on location in the United States and Morocco. Authorities in Dubai refused permission to film there because of the script's political themes.

The threat posed by terrorists is to commit bus bombings in Sheffield and Manchester but they end up blowing themselves up in order to not get caught. On the television, we see an Islamic cleric praising the Jihadists for the bus bombing as he talks about punishing the American "House of War" for their war on the Muslim world. Hani Salaam (Mark Strong) is the head of the Jordanian General Intelligence Directorate. Salaam uses a small-time criminal to work for Jordanian Intelligence but his methods are undermined by Hoffman. In the end it is pretty much a stereotypical film about the might of America and its technology versus the Muslim world that uses the pre-technological age of communication.

*Amreeka* (2009), an independent film written and directed by Cherien Dabis, tells the story of a Palestinian family living in America in 2003, at the beginning of the American invasion of Iraq. It deals with the realities of American life, about being bullied in school for being different, about losing a job because of one's ethnicity and about finding kindness in the unlikeliest of places. Muna Farah is a non-religious, divorced Palestinian woman who wishes to live in America with her son, Fadi. Her wish comes true with the US lottery for green cards. When Fadi is being bullied at school, he fights back and Muna is called to the principal's office. The principal, who is Jewish, is sympathetic and kind. Like many of the European films that provide a glimpse into the lives of ordinary Muslim families, Cherien Dabis does the same by incorporating her own life story into the film. She is a Palestinian-Jordanian who was raised in Dayton, Ohio during the years of the Gulf War, and she encountered discrimination and prejudice.

*Mooz-lum* (2010), an independent film directed by Qasim Basir, is also another story about an American Muslim family. It examines how a young man negotiates through college, how he maintains his family and friend relationships, and the impact of 9/11 on his own life. It is an honest story about a troubled teen growing up in a strict religious household and portrays Islam through character driven narratives.

*Unthinkable*, which also came out in 2010 (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment), is filled with a Hollywood star-studded cast: Samuel L. Jackson, Michael Sheen, and Carrie-Anne Moss. It seriously questions the morally justifiable lengths America should take in a time-sensitive terrorist scenario: perhaps for this reason, this film did not even make it to a theatre but debuted on home video. The film is about an American Muslim convert (also an Iraqi war veteran), Steven Arthur Younger (Michael Sheen), who claims to have placed



three nuclear weapons in three US cities and will detonate them unless his demands are met. He is caught and interrogated by an FBI anti-terrorist agent named Brody (Carrie-Anne Moss) and an independent contractor known as “H” (Samuel Jackson), someone who is not affiliated with the government because he “doesn’t exist.” Only a few government agents are allowed to remain for the interrogation, and they all begin to question H’s methods: he begins by cutting off one of Younger’s fingers and then continues with other forms of torture such as removing finger nails, electrocution, and (seemingly) killing the terrorist’s two children in front of him.<sup>7</sup> Younger’s demands are pro-American: he wants US troops to come home from all Muslim nations and for America to stop funding rebel regimes.

The morality of H’s behaviour is brought into question, in relation to finding the bombs. Is Younger’s family worth sacrificing to save millions? H seems to imply that evil acts must be used in order to fight evil, but what are the limits to such actions? Agent Brody has high ethical standards and sees torture to be as barbaric as the actions of the terrorists. As the story plays out, the question of morality remains at the center of the audience’s perspective – it makes them uncomfortable. The audience must wonder about the psychological toll that extreme interrogation techniques have on the person carrying it out: is H a good guy or a bad guy? Is Younger a well-intentioned terrorist? Much like *Rendition*<sup>8</sup> (2007), which asks the same questions about morality and has an equally unsatisfying ending, *Unthinkable* (2010) ends with the terrorist confessing the locations of the three hidden nuclear bombs.

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<sup>7</sup> This type of movie is often referred to as “torture porn.”

<sup>8</sup> *Rendition* (2007) is the story of an Egyptian-born Muslim, Anwar El Ibrahimy (Omar Metwalli), who is a permanent US resident and married to an American woman. He is detained by the CIA after a suicide bombing in North Africa claims the life of the local CIA station chief. He is mistaken for a terrorist and is tortured by Arab interrogators. Although the film makes note of the oppression of Muslim women in Arab societies, the film in fact critiques the US practice of “extraordinary rendition”: where a person can be detained without being charged, not allowed access to legal counsel, and be tortured (not on American soil though). It also questions whether torture actually works. *Rendition*, starring Reese Witherspoon, Jake Gyllenhaal, Meryl Streep and Peter Sarsgaard, made \$27.03 million at the box office.

### *Conclusion*

Consequently, although there have been very few images of positive Muslims in American film pre-9/11, it seems that, since 2001, there has been more of a mixture of films that have attempted to address the imbalance of representation when it comes to Muslims. Although there still remains the stereotypical male Muslim terrorist and oil rich billionaire, it appears that the representations of Muslims and Muslim culture have taken on a more complex element, and these positive images deserve to be seen by a wider audience. These films are willing to show how Muslim people around the world perceive their own fate and faith in the new world order. They now sometimes illustrate the diversity of Islam. Perhaps as more of these types of films are made, North American viewers will learn something new about Islam, and realize that there is no one real truth to be found about any religious faith. Yet it is important to examine how much each movie made in profits, as it explains which movies are widely seen and which ones are basically placed on a shelf.<sup>9</sup>

### **Box Office**

*Kingdom of Heaven* (2005): \$211.6 million

*Syriana* (2005): \$93.9 million

*Traitor* (2008): \$27.6 million

*Towelhead* (2007): \$675,662

*Rendition* (2007): \$27.03 million

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<sup>9</sup> *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) made \$211.6 million at the box office. *Syriana* (2005) made \$93.9 million. *Rendition* (2007) made \$27.6 million at the box office. *Towelhead* (2007), distributed by Warner Independent Pictures, made \$675,662. *Rendition* (2007), distributed by New Line Cinema, made \$27.03 million. *Traitor* (2008) made \$27 million. *The Kingdom* (2007) made \$86 million. *Body of Lies* (2008) made \$115.1 million. *American East* has no data on earnings but had a budget of \$2.5 million est. *Amreeka* (2009) made \$2.14 million. *Mooz-lum* (2010) made \$330,048. *Unthinkable* (2010) made \$5.48 million. *Djinn* (2013) made \$202,000.

*Body of Lies* (2008): \$115.1 million

*American East* (2008): no data/ budget was \$2.5 million

*Amreeka* (2009): \$2.14 million

*Mooz-lum* (2010): \$330,048

*Unthinkable* (2010): \$5.48 million

*Djinn* (2013): \$202,000

What is the future of Muslims in popular American film? Terrorism, specifically Muslim terrorism against America, pays big money at the box office, and so these themes and images continue to win out in the theatre. Money (as seen in the above box) guides how religion will be portrayed in American film - that is the blockbuster.

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