Terrorism in 21st Century American Cinema

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Rezumat: *America zilelor noastre se arată mai preocupată ca oricând de realitatea sumbră a terorismului. Atacurile de la 11 septembrie 2001 asupra World Trade Center şi a Pentagonului, ca şi noul război împotriva terorismului din întreaga lume, i-au înfricoşat pe majoritatea americanilor care au început să-şi imagineze cele mai exagerate şi improbabile scenarii în loc să caute explicaţii cât de cât plauzibile. Ca reacţie la această atitudine, regizori serioşi, conştienţi de gravitatea momentului, au realizat filme în ultimii zece ani care analizează cu luciditate modul în care obsesia terorismului şi particularităţile capitalismului actual se influenţează reciproc, cu consecinţe nefaste pentru viitorul naţiunii*.
Cuvinte-cheie: *reconstituire, thriller politic, spaimă, paranoia, satiră, tineret/horror, terorism global*

Abstract: *Present-day America finds its citizens more preoccupied with the dreadful reality of terrorism than they have ever been. The 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon and the new war on terrorism around the globe have frightened most of the Americans who began to imagine the most far-flung and unlikely of scenarios instead of looking for more plausible explanations. As a reaction to this attitude, serious directors, aware of the gravity of the moment, have made films over the last decade or so that lucidly examine how the obsession of terrorism and the particularities of capitalism's current form influence each other, with dangerous consquences for the nation's future*.
Keywords: *reconstruction, political thriller, dread, paranoia, satire, youth/horror, global terrorism*

The tragic attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001made terrorism a daily, household word, and a live, serious fear in the United States. The effects arising from the terror of 9/11 reverberated across multiple realms of cultural and political memory in politics, film, and the news media, terrorism becoming "word *and* deed, symbol *and* substance, a form of action whose sheer outrageousness may awe us into silence, but which also compels us to attempt to regain our mental balance by groping toward a narrative structure in which the tragic events can be understood, even if they still make no sense to us" (Clymer, 2003: 211).

During the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and the so-called War on Terror, few major terrorist films were released even though in the previous decade terrorism had generated numerous film fantasies. Indeed, the real events of 9/11 put American cinema in much the same situation as the war film during the Vietnam War: It was only after the Vietnam War was over that American film was ready to tackle the issue and its socio-cultural ramifications.

American cinema rallied behind the terrorist film genre and reinvented it as "the most dynamic, exciting and relevant means of socio-political criticism" (Cettl, 2009: 1). It was not only the mechanics of terrorism that infiltrated these films but the criticism of what was increasingly seen as the circumvention of Constitutional ideals by the George W. Bush administration. Just what the Republican government had done to American ideals of democracy became the subject driving a sudden wave of post–9/11 terrorist films.

Reconstruction of 9/11.While a large number of film and television documentaries dealt with 9/11, *United 93* (2006) was the first major Hollywood film to deal with the catastrophe. The story recreated the hijacked flight during which the passengers allegedly stormed the cockpit and forced the plane to crash in Pennsylvania. The narrative was thus intrinsically tragic, but with a heroic conclusion that demonstrated American will and capability in a time of crisis.

Using hand-held and sometimes erratic camera movements, quick editing, and tight focus on both the interior of the plane and the federal agencies monitoring air traffic control, British director Paul Greengrass deftly explored internal spaces, social relations and group activities, and how individuals responded to crisis and catastrophe. The four Muslim hijackers are introduced praying before their suicide mission, and throughout are shown fervently engaged in prayer, but they are also portrayed as conflicted and afraid. The passengers on the plane are portrayed initially as ordinary citizens, involved in the mundane rituals of everyday life, as they fidget with their cell phones, exchange banalities with each other, and eventually become aware of the disaster

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unfolding. Likewise, the pilots are shown as quite ordinary people, as are the members of the federal bureaucracies and US military that react to the day's calamity.

The most critical aspect of the film is the incompetence with which the government agencies and military respond to the hijackings. While air traffic controllers overhear conversations that suggest a hijacking, they seem not to communicate effectively with the Federal Aviation Administration or the military. The different agencies fail to see the big picture, appear to have no coordination, and are depicted as powerless spectators of the catastrophe. Not only are the air traffic controllers and the military unable to communicate with each other, but they are also unable to contact the president or vice-president, who are the only ones who can ratify military action. Thus, the film shows a thoroughly dysfunctional government and air defense system which – despite all its high-tech instruments and professionals – are not able to prevent or intelligently address the catastrophe. By contrast, the passengers on United 93 evidently grasp the magnitude of the event, as they learn from cell phone conversation with friends and loved ones of the WTC crashes, and organize to overpower the hijackers and storm the cockpit to seize control of the plane.

United 93 thus "operates on the terrain of everyday life and institutional space, rather than in the Hollywood space of highly individualized characters and relations, using an aesthetic of naturalism rather than melodrama" (Kellner, 2010: 103). The hijackers are portrayed as frightened but committed young Muslim men, and there is no comic-book caricature or demonization of Arabs and Muslims such as one finds in typical generic Hollywood thrillers. Likewise, it is ordinary people who stand in for their fellow citizens and take heroic action.

Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006) was also quite low key in its depiction of Port Authority police saving the lives of victims. The film is sentimental, focusing on the heroism, entrapment in the ruins, and rescue of two working-class policemen, who represent the ordinary people who bore the brunt of 9/11. It is conservative in following traditional Hollywood generic forms and storytelling, and in failing to deal with the political context.

The intensely populist focus of the film encodes the message that the victims of 9/11 were innocent people, comprising a variety of races and ethnicities. *World Trade Center* suggests that terrorism, which senselessly and indiscriminately strikes at civilians, is monstrous. Its victims are ordinary people trying to get on with their lives and raise their families. The film also shows families and communities pulling together in response to the tragedy, and discovering new resources of strength and capability, conveying the message that the United States will surely pull together to fight its enemies.

Stone's drama is perhaps too understated, failing to address even minimally the political context of the attack and the existence and strategy of the perpetrators. The Port Authority policemen gather at headquarters for a typical day's work, in this case, looking for a young runaway at a bus station. Then the catastrophe strikes. A brief shadow of an airliner passing over a building denotes the attack – Stone refrains from showing the iconic pictures of the plane hitting the WTC. Curiously, no mention is made of al Qaeda or terrorism. This omission will have sinister connotations near the end of the film when one of the characters is cited as joining the military and going to Iraq, as if Iraq were involved in the attack.

The film draws on generic features of the disaster film, showing people on the street reacting to the horror and TV images of the event. Sent to Ground Zero to rescue workers, several of the Port Authority policemen are themselves trapped in the ruins and much of the film deals with how they cope with their plight, the effects on their family and friends, and their eventual rescue. The scenes of the multi-ethnic police volunteering for the mission "evoke the codes of World War II films in which ordinary soldiers become heroes or victims" (Kellner, 2010: 105).

Stone's film is thus deeply conservative. It extols the humanity and courage of ordinary Americans, but fails to explore the reasons for the attack. Moreover, Stone uses the most manipulative aspects of the family melodrama to elicit sympathy for the trapped policemen and their families, and ends with the triumphalist Hollywood ideology of heroism overcoming adversity. *World Trade Center* focuses on 9/11 as "the contemporary equivalent of a loss of national innocence" (Cettl, 2009: 291), an event which for Stone galvanized the country into a mix of patriotism and sentimentality, qualities which infect his treatment of the plot.

Political Thriller. By 2006, terror war was a dominant subtext to the political thrillers of the epoch. Both the popular TV series *24* and the Hollywood thriller franchise *Mission: Impossible*

III (2006) had plots focusing on the dangers of catastrophic terrorist attacks and featured villains within the US government, raising questions about who could be trusted. The popular *Mission: Impossible* TV series (1966–1973) and the two previous *M:I* films frequently featured the dangers of terrorism in a global context. TV director J. J. Abrams's *Mission: Impossible III* (2006) ups the threat level, depicting nefarious forces within the US government, as well as international arms dealers seeking to put weapons of mass destruction into the hands of terrorist organizations. In a fast paced shift of its narrative from Berlin to Rome to Shanghai and sites from the west to the east coast of the US, the film points to the global nature and amorality of the illicit arms trade and dangers of terrorism from multiple sources. *M:I III*'s spy operatives work as a team, demonstrating the importance of combining individual initiative with group efficiency, and features sudden reversals of fortune, as control shifts from the Bad Guys to the Good Guys. The brisk narrative moves back and forth in "a ballet of capture, escape, pursuit, action-adventure exploits, high-tech explosives, fights, and resolutions" (Kellner, 2010: 118). Most significantly, *MI:III* features and legitimates torture and murder in fighting evil terrorists and their accomplices. The team uses similar torture methods to the villains, presenting torture as natural and normalizing it as part of the rules of the game. The film thus legitimated torture at a time of furious debate as to whether its use by the Bush administration was really effective, whether it exposed US forces to violations of the Geneva conventions and international law, and whether the US should sacrifice higher moral values and political ground in the name of national security. In *MI:III*, as in many American films that followed, torture functioned as "an ethical discourse on a civilization that in the rhetoric of the War on Terror justifies the effective violation of an individual's human rights in order to potentially protect a greater number from the terrorist intention to rob them of their right to self-determination" (Cettl, 2009: 182).

Torture in fighting terrorism was also normalized in the TV series *24* (2001–2010), which featured its operatives using more and more extreme methods as terrorist threats intensified. Yet the fifth season of *24* (2006) provides one of the more radical attempts to deal with US politics and terrorism in a post-9/11 context. The first four seasons demonized a series of Muslim, Arab, Slavic, Russian, and other ethnic terrorists; the fifth season, however, featured a paranoid and warped president in league with terrorists in a never-clearly delineated attempt to control oil supplies in the former Russian republics. Thus, while providing startling allegorical visions of the criminal activities of the current US political administration, the series also legitimated torture, political assassination, and other breaches of international law.

Dread and Paranoia. In Ben Rekhi's *Waterborne* (2005), Los Angeles' water supplies have been contaminated by a biological agent, people are dying, and the media create hysteria. As water supplies disappear, tensions and conflicts emerge. The film focuses on how the crisis affects three sets of characters who converge on a convenience store at the end, where a young man goes berserk and pulls out a gun to rob water when he is shot by a National Guardsman. *Waterborne* has an interesting subtext concerning how Sikh Americans are demonized in the crisis, drawing on real-life attacks on Sikhs after 9/11 who were mistakenly believed to be Muslims. However, despite having a disturbed white guy as the villain with no apparent motive – thus undercutting the film's media (and perhaps audience) suspicion that it is a Muslim terror attack – the film ultimately is very conservative. A narrator intones that in such situations one comes to appreciate the little things in life, like the flow of water, and "people close to me." Thus, ultimately, sentimentalism trumps the film's often acute insights into how people might react during a terror crisis.

M. Night Shyamalan's *The Happening* (2008) articulates the inchoate dread and paranoia in post-9/11 America with its tale of inexplicable mass suicides infecting first urban and then small town areas. Rumors at first accuse terrorism for the horrors, but then government, nuclear power, and even nature are blamed in the narrative. In its eco-horror genre ambience, it is as if nature itself were rebelling against humans and setting off toxic forces.

Satire. The dichotomy between bad terrorists and good Americans is undercut in Uwe Boll's savage satire, *Postal* (2008). This totally over-the-top post-9/11 film attacks American business, religion, commodity culture, cultural clichés, Islamic terrorists, and the director's home country, Germany. Interspersing 9/11 jokes about airline hijacking and suicide bombing, the film presents Osama bin Laden and George W. Bush as good ole buddies, and ends with them walking into the sunset holding hands as a nuclear blast is about to destroy the earth. Full of bad taste, it

puts on display how deep cynicism and deranged irony have returned with a vengeance to contemporary cinema whereas irony was supposedly banned after 9/11.

Youth/Horror. Contemporary fears among youth were articulated in Matt Reeves's *Cloverfield* (2008). The film uses a rampaging monster scenario to provide the backdrop for an apocalyptic terrorization of New York City. Playing on post-9/11 fears, the film uses 9/11 imagery of falling skyscrapers, panic in the streets, dust and blood-soaked mobs running from the disaster, and general chaos portending social collapse. The monster is never really clearly shown, yet the decapitated head of the Statue of Liberty that appears in a crowd scene in lower Manhattan suggests a broader theme of the end of innocence even for the affluent young, in an era where spectacles of terror had become part of everyday life.

Global Terrorism. There have also been epic Hollywood political thrillers dealing with global terrorism, like Stephen Gaghan's *Syriana* (2005). Gaghan's film uses political allegory to provide a complex vision of the complicity of US corporations and government with political regimes and oil barons in the Middle East, and how that involvement has produced terrorism. *Syriana* transcodes mistrust of oil corporations and Arab sheiks, the CIA and government agencies, and their involvement in criminal activities and terrorism. In intertwining stories about the Middle East, oil corporations contending for markets, Gulf emirs pushing competing national and US/corporate interests, Islamic terrorists and the CIA, and politicians acting with the various interests, the film comments allegorically on the nexus of powers wreaking havoc. The film's most radical claim is that "Arab dictatorships and Islamic states could only be democratized by the development of progressive indigenous reform movements that the US had often worked hard to contain or shut down" (Holloway, 2008: 97).

Another Middle Eastern political thriller, Peter Berg's *The Kingdom* (2007), transcodes more conservative discourses in a conventional Hollywood format. The film tackles one of the most sensitive issues in US foreign policy: relations with Saudi Arabia and the latter's connection to terrorism. An opening montage encapsulates US-Saudi relations, from the 1930s when oil was discovered, to 9/11, shortly after which it was revealed that 15 of the 19 alleged WTC murderers were Saudis. The film cuts to Americans in a softball game at a picnic in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where US oil workers live with their families in an American-style community. Mayhem ensues when Saudi guards are shot and terrorists posing as policemen invade the compound and begin killing Americans. Suicide bombers blow themselves up and take out more than a hundred people with them, including two FBI agents.

The Kingdom combines aspects of a forensic crime drama with an action-adventure film and a political thriller. Saudi Islamicist terrorists are uncovered as perpetrators of the crime, putting on display familiar images of terrorists killing innocents, using the Internet to propagandize their deeds, recruiting children as murderers, and preparing to behead one of the captured team members. Diplomacy and negotiation with the Saudis are shown to be futile; resolute militant action is shown as necessary. The Saudi police are represented as inefficient, obstructive, and devious, but in a few days the Americans have discovered the terrorist cell responsible for the killings. In a rousing 30-minute climax, the cell is hunted down and destroyed. The Saudis themselves are pictured as either good allies of the Americans or evil terrorists devoted to murder and mayhem, just as the Americans are divided in Manichean fashion into good, aggressive, all-American men of action contrasted to liberal, do-nothing bureaucrats. The FBI agents invade a Saudi compound to blow away the terrorists, providing narrative closure with an American victory over evil terrorists.

Michael Winterbottom's *A Mighty Heart* (2007) provides a nuanced presentation of the impact of terrorist actions on victims while exploring the complexity of Middle Eastern politics. Recounting the kidnapping and execution of American journalist Daniel Pearl, it focuses on the efforts of his wife, Mariane, their friends and colleagues, and American and Pakistani officials to track down the perpetrators. Eschewing black and white stereotypes, it shows a variety of individuals from different cultures and backgrounds working together to solve the mystery of who kidnapped Pearl and how to save him. The story ends in tragedy, as the Jihadists beheaded Pearl and showed the killing on a video distributed on the Internet. However, unfolding the story captures the complexity of Pakistani politics, with a great diversity of people with differing views.

Conclusion. The first decade of the new millennium exhibited intense political struggle and infamy, and Hollywood film was right at the center of the action, offering cinematic visions that provided contemporary viewers and future audiences insight into the nightmares of the period. As we advance into the second decade, there will no doubt be further crises, struggles, and dramatic events, and it will be fascinating to see how Hollywood film develops in the emerging historical moment.

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