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Argo: CIA Influence and American Jingoism

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Abstract

“Argo: CIA Influence and American Jingoism” focuses on the ways in which CIA involvement in the production and publicity of Ben Affleck’s *Argo* (2012) yielded a biased representation of the Iranian public. Throughout the film, Affleck pictures Iranians as aggressive and deindividualized, spreading the trope of the Middle Eastern fanatic to viewers worldwide. While villainizing the Iranian public, *Argo* undermines a fraught history of United States intervention in Iran. Although Affleck takes several liberties in cinematizing the Iranian Hostage Crisis, *Argo* masquerades as a historical authority, peppered with markers of authenticity such as newsreel footage. I argue that the film oversteps its bounds by leveraging the glamor and reach of Hollywood to fulfill a political agenda during a time of tension between the United States and Iran.

“The producer knows that historical events alone don’t cut it. You need lights, camera, action” (Dargis). Ben Affleck’s *Argo* (2012) refashions a slice of history, the exfiltration of six American diplomats from Tehran during the Iranian Hostage Crisis, in a distinctly Hollywood manner. With the help of makeup artist John Chambers (John Goodman) and producer Lester Siegel (Alan Arkin), CIA agent Tony Mendez (Ben Affleck) devises a plan to rescue the six Americans under the guise of a fake Canadian film production company. During the production of *Argo*, Affleck drew from several authorities, synthesizing archival records and a 2012 understanding of Iran-United States relations. The historical event passed through layers of interpretation before becoming *Argo*; screenwriter

Chris Terrio adapted both Tony Mendez’s memoir *The Master of Disguise* and Joshua Bearman’s article “How the CIA Used a Fake Sci-Fi Flick to Rescue Americans From Tehran.” *Argo* enjoyed enormous commercial and critical success, exceeding \$200 million in international ticket sales and receiving the 2013 Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Adapted Screenplay, and Best Film Editing (McClintock). Seen by millions, the film did not just reflect its particular version of the past; it likely influenced perceptions of the CIA, the Iranian regime, and the Iranian public, both within the United States and abroad. This essay explores how the United States government and the entertainment industry cooperated during the production of *Argo*. In what follows, I show how a series of overlapping

interests converge into a film that villainizes Iran, promoting an American jingoistic political agenda while masquerading as both entertainment and historical truth.

Argo raises several questions that fit into a broader dialogue on historical fiction and documentary. In “History and Fiction: An Uneasy Marriage?” J. Thomas Lindblad discusses the ambiguities implicit in historical fiction: “History seeks to come as close as possible to truth, but fiction is by definition not truthful ... History is based on research, while fiction on imagination, on occasion spiced by personal memory” (Lindblad 147). Creators of historical fiction inevitably undergo the task of striving for truth within the framework of fiction, which involves filling in details and dialogue, heightening drama, and reformulating the past into a “story with a beginning, a middle, and an end” (Lindblad 148; Rosenstone 85). The director faces an additional set of challenges due to the mimetic qualities of cinema. In “The History Film as a Mode of Historical Thought,” Robert A. Rosenstone compares written and cinematic works of history: “We, who have written works of history or biographies ... know that, however vivid and dramatic the language we try to employ, our prose can never come close to the capabilities of film in creating what we imagine the look, feel, and sound of the past to have been” (Rosenstone 83). Adjacent to the history film, the documentary likewise claims truthfulness, has roots in real life, and involves a tension between representation and reality (Aufderheide 24, 32). *Argo* does not claim to be a documentary. However, the

film incorporates several documentary elements — newsreel footage, oral testimonies, and photographs — all of which receive considerable attention in this essay. Rosenstone argues that understanding a history film requires both formal analysis and a study of the work’s relationship to past and present (Rosenstone 84). Following Rosenstone’s paradigm, I touch upon *Argo*’s historical veracity, discuss the involvement of the CIA during production, and conduct a formal analysis of the film. I engage with the ways in which *Argo*’s identity as a Hollywood blockbuster complicates its relationship to history. Contradictions between past, present, and fiction within the film make it a rich case study of the challenges that beset historical fiction in contemporary Hollywood.

In considering *Argo*, the question of perspective warrants discussion. Adapting history into fiction, Terrio and Affleck selected moments that promote a distinctly American ideology while omitting events that expose United States and CIA fault. A product of CIA and Hollywood cooperation, the film disregards certain domestic and international narratives to produce a film that champions the daring and bravery of the CIA in the face of an Islamic other. The fact that *Argo* — a Hollywood film that caters largely to an American audience — contains embellishments that make the film fast-paced and patriotic should not come as a surprise. Embedded in a tradition of showmanship, the film has little obligation to provide a historically accurate account. However, the film’s publicity, as well as several cinematic elements within the film, claim

realism without admitting bias. In what follows, I present the historical inaccuracies and manipulations contained within *Argo*.

Alluded to ever so briefly at the start of the film, the CIA and MI6 (a United Kingdom intelligence service), played a fraught role in the events leading up to the Hostage Crisis. Indeed, the one concession to the concerns of the Iranian people, a “two-minute storyboard prologue” added late in the production process, received criticism from the CIA (Shaw and Jenkins 108). David Robarge, the agency’s Chief Historian, spoke out against Affleck, “for not showing that the increasingly authoritarian Mosaddegh had largely been thrown out of power by his own people” (108).¹ However, documents reveal the profound involvement of the CIA in the 1953 coup, as well as a lasting relationship between the CIA and the SAVAK, the Shah’s infamous secret police. Over the course of the Shah’s reign, the agency provided both advice and weapons to the regime (108).

From start to finish, the film characterizes the Iranian public as homogenous. Although Ayatollah Khomeini served as the primary figurehead of the Iranian Revolution, protests brought together groups with diverse political affiliations against the corruption of the Shah. The film isolates the American viewer, conditioned to staunchly oppose the

integration of religion and state, by emphasizing the “religious fanaticism” of the Iranian Revolution while downplaying the political context, for which the CIA was partially liable. Filmed through a jingoistic American lens, *Argo* eliminates the nuance behind the political movement.

Bias encoded in Mendez’s memoir and Bearman’s *Wired* article also influences the film. In *The Master of Disguise*, Mendez writes the following: “Tehran had become a city ruled by gangs of well-armed zealots whose loyalty lay with a shifting alliance of Muslim clerics loosely united under Khomeini” (257). Mendez evokes an image of violent radicalism, characterized by confusion and lack of coherent organization. In describing the storming of the embassy, he writes the following: “unpredictable and gratuitous violence seemed inevitable in a country on the brink of anarchy” (261). Mendez patronizes the revolutionary forces, describing their violence as “gratuitous” and undermines the complex history that led up to the historical moment. At the same time, he pardons them on the grounds that he cannot expect more, given the country’s political instability. In the following description, Mendez describes Iranian kindness as unprecedented: “The fellow refused graciously, placing his hand on his heart and offering a gold-toothed smile, as if to indicate that the Revolution, faithful to the true tenets of Islam, was grounded in hospitality. It was hard to reconcile this image

¹ Mohammad Mosaddegh was Iran’s prime minister leading up to the 1953 coup d’état, which instated Reza Pahlavi as Shah. While Mosaddegh endeavored to nationalize Iranian oil, Reza Pahlavi

relinquished oil holdings to the United States and the United Kingdom.

with the brutal reality” (292). Incompatible with his characterization of the Iranian “bandit,” Mendez refuses to acknowledge the diversity contained within the Revolution, assuming that every revolutionary fits the same mold of the violent Islamic fanatic (258).

Despite its evident leanings, *Argo* claims verisimilitude. Robarge, the Chief Historian of the CIA, has heralded the film as an authentic work of nonfiction, contrasting it against CIA “pseudo-histories,” such as Robert De Niro’s *The Good Shepherd* (2008) (Shaw and Jenkins 111). Shortly after *Argo*’s release date, the CIA presented commemorative artwork depicting the mission. Meanwhile, concept art from the agency’s original fake production featured in exhibits related to espionage across the United States. Because of the CIA’s involvement in the film’s publicity, *Argo* takes on a status beyond that of a Hollywood blockbuster (Shaw and Jenkins 111-112). Elements within the film, such as interwoven documentary footage and photos of the actors with the people that they represent, further assert cinematic realism. Capitalizing on its “based on a true story” appeal, the film presents itself as a reliable source of history.

The production crew peppered *Argo* with signals of authenticity. Allegedly, the film’s sound designers recreated the sirens of 1970s Iran. The costume and production designers studied newsreels, magazines, and home videos of Iranian expatriates. Mendez kept his 1980s outfits in commemoration of the personally significant mission, and the costume team

constructed perfect replicas. Even the glasses of the escapees were recreated from passport photos (Kit). In an interview, Affleck heralded the measures taken to ensure that *Argo* faithfully represented reality: “ ‘Was it real? Could it have been real? Is it as close to real as we know?’ We adhered to that pretty slavishly in terms of hair, makeup, set decorations — everything” (qtd. in Kit). During the credits of *Argo*, stills from the film and photographs from the real-life mission appear side-by-side. The actors look and dress like their historical counterparts. By showing several distinct instances in which the film recreated the past, the film makes a claim about its accuracy. The first image shows John Chambers and his counterpart in the film, John Goodman, making the same hand motion as they apply makeup to outlandish characters. In an interview with NPR, Affleck quipped about the similarity between the two men, recounting a story about how sciatic John Goodman unintentionally emulated Chambers’s limp (Affleck). For the six diplomats, close-ups parallel Canadian passports, all with striking accuracy. Scenes from the film even emulate unnamed Iranians waving a burning American flag, scaling the gates to the United States Embassy, and assembling shredded documents. In both the film and the photographs, veiled women wield guns and a dead man hangs by the neck from a crane. However, while paying enormous amounts of attention to physical details, *Argo* misrepresented major historical events.

Several details of the film have no basis in the past, and feature purely to provoke blockbuster excitement. In

conversation with BBC reporter Vincent Dowd, United States diplomat Mark Lijek, one of the six escapees, discussed the authenticity of *Argo*. According to Dowd, the film's Hollywood subplot contains glaring embellishments. *Argo* draws suspense from the constant risk that Iranians, often portrayed as angry chanting mobs, will discover the Americans' plan. While the film generates excitement with ornaments such as the knowing maid and the timely assembly of embassy documents,² the Americans' disguise was, in reality, never questioned. In one of the film's champion moments of heroic danger, the diplomats strut through the bazaar to go to location scouting; in the far less glamorous reality, the diplomats stayed home under the pretense that the Canadian ambassador informed them of "instability on the streets" (Dowd). In the film's climax, the revolutionary guards realize just moments too late that they have been deceived. They grab their guns, hop in a police car, and chase down the plane, but the flight still manages to clear Iranian airspace. In truth, the Revolutionary Guard never questioned the fake film crew at the airport (Dowd).

While Canada and the United States worked together to exfiltrate the diplomats, *Argo* deemphasizes the collaborative nature of the enterprise and spotlights the success of American intelligence. Before the great escape, Canadians investigated the

mechanics of Tehran's Mehrabad Airport, "sent people in and out of Iran to establish random patterns," helped the Americans communicate with their families, and (hilariously) gave the six Americans lessons in how to sound Canadian (Haglund; Wald). In the film, Canadian Ambassador Ken Taylor emerges as a passive host, all-too-willing to conform to the whims of the CIA, rather than an active agent who collected intelligence at the request of United States President Jimmy Carter (Haglund).

While the six diplomats ultimately ended up in Canadian hands, Britain likewise played an active role that remains unexplored in the film. Martin Williams, the First Secretary of the commercial section at the British Embassy in Tehran, published an article based on personal letters written by him and his wife. His account, titled "*Argo* and Other Excitements Around Iran's Islamic Revolution: A Personal View," details his experience and how *Argo* deviates from it. Within the film, a United States government official makes an off-handed comment about the unwillingness of the British to help the escapees: "Brits turned them away, Kiwis turned them away." In reality, Williams harbored the six Americans in his neighborhood before ultimately delivering them to the Canadian embassy (Williams 19-20). However, the situation grew increasingly dangerous for both Williams and the Americans.

² The government did hire carpet weavers to piece together documents shredded during the storming of the embassy; however, in reality, this reassembly of information functioned more as a distant threat than a looming concern (Bearman). Within *Argo*, rows of young children, not carpet weavers, stitch

together the shredded documents in a sweatshop. In associating the job with child labor and inhumane working conditions, the film provokes unease in the American viewer. *Argo* presents the attempt to identify United States spies as an immoral endeavor.

Protesters occupied the British Embassy, and the Revolutionary Guard came to search the Williams' compound (20-21). He then decided that it would be safer to house the diplomats in a vacant U.S. embassy residence. He escorted them there and, a few days later, to the Canadian Embassy (21).

While seemingly innocuous, the misrepresentation of Britain's involvement in the CIA's mission is symptomatic of the film's unwillingness to engage with a difficult past. Leading up to and during the Iranian Revolution, the United States and Britain came to occupy a similar space in the Iranian consciousness. Both nations, desiring to profit from Iran's burgeoning oil industry, helped incite the 1953 military coup d'état which resulted in the controversial reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi. While Mohammad Mosaddegh, the prime minister of Iran, advocated for the nationalization of Iranian oil, the Shah exhibited more willingness to conduct business abroad and, therefore, better aligned with American and British interests. With the rise of anti-Shah sentiments, the United States and Britain became national villains, colloquially known as the Great Satan and the Little Satan (Williams 18). To address why the Canadians could help while the British could not, the film would need to further engage with the shared place of the United States and Britain in Iranian history. Rather than dedicating valuable screen time to this backstory, *Argo* casts the British off as unhelpful. In diluting the role of Canadian and British allies in the exfiltration mission, the film benefits both the United

States government and Hollywood as a feel-good tale of triumphant American heroism.

The CIA wielded enormous influence over the production of *Argo* after decades of an up-and-down relationship between the American film industry and United States intelligence. In *From Zero to Hero: The CIA and Hollywood Today*, Tony Shaw and Tricia Jenkins discuss CIA interference in Hollywood. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the CIA, lacking a potent enemy, lost both funding and favor (Shaw and Jenkins 103). Hollywood, with its long-standing tendency to villainize United States intelligence, posed a blatant threat to the agency's image. From the CIA's inception, Hollywood films have codified the agency according to a handful of stereotypes — an institution out to kill in Sydney Pollack's *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), a cold institution with disregard for individual employees in Ridley Scott's *Body of Lies* (2008), and an immoral force in Sam Peckinpah's *The Osterman Weekend* (1983) (Shaw and Jenkins 91-92). In the mid-1990s, the CIA decided to take action. The agency appointed its first entertainment industry liaison, Chase Brandon, in order to “to educate filmmakers about the role of the CIA, to use the agency's assets to negotiate for more favorable representations in scripts, to encourage filmmakers to publicize CIA successes, and to guide producers during their research” (Shaw and Jenkins 92). Since the program's inception, entertainment industry liaisons have influenced Hollywood productions in several ways. In a project titled Now

Playing, 2007 Entertainment Industry Liaison Paul Berry compiled a list of stories from declassified CIA archives ripe for cinematic adaptation. In several recent films, including *Argo*, the CIA's public affairs team has collaborated with writers and directors during pre-production to shape the films' trajectories (Shaw and Jenkins 92).

Throughout the filmmaking process, the CIA's Office of Public Affairs worked closely with the cast and crew of *Argo* to guarantee that the finished product aligned with the CIA's desired media presence. The agency arranged for "several members of the cast and crew to consult with former and current CIA officers to get the look and feel of the agency in the 1970s just right" (Shaw and Jenkins 105). Allegedly, the meetings left the cast and crew with inspiration and newfound drive to "accurately" depict the operatives' experiences. Writer Chris Terrio and Director Ben Affleck regularly communicated with official CIA historians. The agency even granted Affleck permission to shoot scenes at their headquarters in Langley, Virginia (Shaw and Jenkins 105). Nobody involved in the production of *Argo* has publicly expressed concern with the government's involvement — on the contrary, they view the CIA's participation as an act of generosity, not coercion. In some respects, *Argo* gained legitimacy from insider access to CIA resources; the cast and crew acquired knowledge that

helped them accurately depict the experience of Mendez and other CIA operatives. However, government involvement simultaneously paved the way for a distorted representation of the Iranian public.

The film treats a thirty-year-old moment, largely distant from the public discourse in 2012. Any discussion of CIA involvement in the Hostage Crisis, declassified in 1997, would have long passed. As Jenkins and Shaw argue, the distance between the production of *Argo* and the historical source allowed the film to reshape the event in the public consciousness. In the 1970s, the CIA incurred criticism due to its inability to foresee the Iranian Revolution, an oversight which endangered Americans living in Iran (Shaw and Jenkins 107). Glazing over that faux pas on the part of the CIA,³ *Argo* burnishes the agency's image by instead focusing on a resoundingly positive event from the same time period.

The 2013 Oscars similarly bore witness to Washington-Hollywood cooperation. First Lady Michelle Obama announced the 2013 Academy Award for Best Picture "live from the White House" (a phrase that in and of itself evokes an Orwellian melding of government and entertainment) (Oscars). The choice to have a political figure announce a political film, especially one featuring photographs of former United States President Jimmy Carter and crafted in consultation with the CIA,

³ Within the film, OSS Officer Nicholls, a fellow spy, approaches Mendez at the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. In their conversation, Nicholls references the CIA's failure to predict the Iranian

Revolution: "Iran is 100% not in a pre-revolutionary state. CIA brief, November 1, 1979."

bolstered the film's historical authority. The announcement served as another way in which *Argo* sits at the precipice between film and politics.

Through its sound, camerawork, and mise-en-scène, *Argo* villainizes Iran, aligning itself with the CIA's interests. While the film's prologue engages with some of the more troubling elements of United States-Iranian history, it does so evasively, narrating the past in a fairytale style. Before the opening shot, generic Middle Eastern music, equipped with shrill woodwinds and a somber guitar, plays in the background.⁴ The title *Argo* appears in a sleek and futuristic block letter font. The fusion of the traditional Middle Eastern soundtrack with the sci-fi typography foreshadows the eruption of Western-style modernity into an ancient culture. A monotone American female voice narrates a two-minute condensation of Iranian history, beginning with the Persian Empire around 500 B.C. and ending in the late 20th century. While her words demonstrate sympathy towards the Iranian people, the lack of inflection in her voice sterilizes the narrative, rendering Western intervention in the Middle East palatable. Storyboard-style images accompany the narration, expressing the history in a visual language that permeates the film. Throughout *Argo*, Mendez and the diplomats use stylistically similar storyboards as a tool for deception, as props used to convince the Revolutionary

Guard and angry civilians of their identity as a Canadian film crew. Beyond establishing the storyboard motif, the prologue's rough, cartoon aesthetic distances the account from reality.⁵ Although the introduction gives credence to Iranian concerns, it reformulates the country's history through an American lens.

The opening image encompasses several contradictions that persist throughout the film. A cartoon map of the Persian empire transports the viewer to someplace else, someplace Non-Western. The details aren't important. The outline is crude and the lines are rough. Ill-defined text reading "Persian Empire," not the precision of the map, situates us in a Middle Eastern context. The less-than-subtle caption "Ancient Map" contradicts the image's distinctly contemporary aesthetic. From the first frame, a dissonance between the contemporary American narratorial perspective and the represented subject becomes evident. Another sketch of an armed figure screaming "Aaaarrgh" lines the bottom of the screen, establishing a historically-rooted precedent for the barbaric Middle Eastern, a trope that persists throughout the film.

When the prologue moves onto recent history, grainy newsreel footage appears, exposing a tension between fantasy and history. Through transitioning from drawings to archival footage, the prologue transitions into the real world. The film now has to reconcile artistic license with what really happened.

⁴ Later scenes in the film forge a link between traditional Iranian music and violence; music often accompanies images of armed Iranian men.

⁵ While cartoons can strive for realism, as argued by Japanese film scholar Imamura Taihei, the animations in the prologue of *Argo* contain very minimal detail, styled to resemble storyboard sketches (Lamarre 223-226).

The narrator shifts focus from the Iranian monarchy to the rule of Mohammad Mosaddegh, a secular democrat. When Iran enters into the Western fold of democracy, the country gains legitimacy in the eyes of the film, as demonstrated by the shift to newsreel footage. Iran transitions from a mystical land, characterized by kings, armor, and battles, to a democratic country. However, with the rise of democracy, Iran becomes a threat to American dominance. Newsreel footage of an oil explosion accompanies an explanation of Mosaddegh's defiance. The refusal to relinquish oil holdings to the United States and Britain emerges as an act of warfare.

The sequence addresses Iranian concerns without vilifying the United States. Horrifying images show extreme violence against Iranian citizens. However, the Shah's secret police, not the CIA or the MI6, embodies the enemy. While the droning narration admits United States fault, the images say otherwise. Rough cartoons, not photographs or footage, document American participation in the military coup. Drawings picture a collection of white people seated around a table, focused on a map labeled Iran. The accompanying arrow reads "boom." The next cartoon image visualizes the violent plans, picturing three white men wielding guns against a swarm of angry Iranians.⁶ However, childish drawings cast the violence off as a story, not a reality. The scene that follows the prologue likewise features an Iranian crowd and an outnumbered group

of Americans. However, while the cartoon briefly situates American forces in the role of the villain, the later live-action footage victimizes United States diplomats.

With the rise of the Shah, a new form of media enters into the sequence — colored photographs. The Shah dedicated much of his time in power to modernizing Iran, which the film cinematically represents with the introduction of color photography. As the prologue approaches its end, fact and fiction begin to meld together. The cartoon images fade into photographs. In the most striking case, a drawing depicts the Shah's men circled around a body hanging by its feet from the ceiling, pierced by three bloody bullet wounds. The center of the image fades into a photograph while the periphery remains hand-drawn, highlighting the fact that serious events quite literally underlie the two hours of entertainment to come. Afterwards, another form of media enters into the equation — a magazine image featuring Googoosh, an Iranian pop star and a symbol of a Westernized, pre-revolutionary Iran (Hemmasi 157-158). Through splicing together a pastiche of visual media, the film purports to present a cohesive view of mid-20th century Iranian history.

Towards the end, the sequence presents a battle between the United States and Iran as embodied through their major political figures. In one particular photographic image, a poster reads "Carter," lined above and below by Stars of David

⁶ Within the drawing, the camera becomes a weapon — an arrow reading "Camera" lies parallel to the American guns. The film-as-

weapon motif reappears with a vengeance when the CIA uses the power of cinema to thwart Iranian forces.

and framed below by a swastika and a dollar sign. Although the Stars of David and the swastika represent two diametrically opposed ideologies, the Islamic protestors collapse what they perceive as the evils of the West — Judaism, Nazism, and capitalist greed — into an anti-Carter poster. The crass iconography of the image creates a one-dimensional, incoherent portrait of pro-Khomeini, anti-Carter sentiment. A pole divides the image in two, with the Carter poster on one side and a poster of Ayatollah Khomeini on the other. Jimmy Carter emerges as the antithesis of the Ayatollah, so much so that they cannot even occupy a shared visual space. The same image of Khomeini reappears several times throughout the film, signaling an overwhelming sentiment for Islam and against America within Iran. The sequence ends with a fade from footage of Iranian protesters, fists in the air, to a black screen with white text: “Based on a true story.” Within the first two minutes of the film, through footage, photographs, and the interplay between text and image, *Argo* promises to tell us the truth.

Following the prologue comes the storming of the embassy, which categorizes the Iranian revolutionary forces as an antagonistic collective. The scene begins with a close-up of a flaming American flag, swinging back and forth as protestors chant “Death to America” in Farsi. The soundtrack establishes a firm connection between the film and Tony Mendez’s memoir, *The Master of Disguise*. Several times throughout Mendez’s chapter on Iran, militants chant what Mendez identifies as an Iranian battle-cry: “Death to America!” (Mendez, *The Master of*

Disguise 257, 268, 290). The film opens with a tribute to the original text. At the same time, the image recreates a 1979 photograph of a flaming American flag, shown in the final credits of the film. Through sound and image, the scene collapses two historical authorities, a personal narrative and a (more) objective document. Subsequent shots cut between crisp and grainy images; the variance demonstrates how *Argo* wavers between a historical documentary film and a high-budget Hollywood blockbuster. Furthermore, with extra film grain added to some of the footage, *Argo* aesthetically recreates the real-life newsreels that feature in the prologue and reappear throughout the film.

From beginning to end, the scene provokes fear through its portrayal of crowd dynamics. In an interview with NPR, Affleck discussed the power of a crowd, justifying his choice to shoot the storming of the embassy on-location in Istanbul with extras rather than using digital effects (despite the fact that much of *Argo* was filmed in the backlots of Culver City studios). The film crew entered Turkey expecting to easily recruit young people to act as Iranian student protesters. However, due to Turkey’s thriving economy, their budget could not sway enough students or working adults to appear as extras. The crew turned to the only group of participants willing to appear in sufficiently large numbers: senior citizens (Affleck). Nonetheless, the scene provokes fear — distance of framing identifies the crowd as a menacing whole while conveniently concealing the participants’ age demographics. A crane shot establishes the

protest — a sea of heads decorated with Farsi text and Iranian flags. Later shots implicate the United States through English references to the Vietnam War, an image of the Statue of Liberty as a skeleton, and a blow-up caricature of Uncle Sam. However, the first shot estranges the American viewer through the burning flag and the plethora of presumably angry text written solely in a foreign alphabet. The protesters emerge first and foremost as Iranian, incomprehensible to the American viewer. As shown from above, the protest snakes as far as the eye can see. Heads and signs extend up until a distant vanishing point.

While extreme long shots show the extent of the protest, close-ups and medium shots filmed within the crowd using a handheld camera expose chaos on the ground. No protestor can appear alone; each frame shows dozens of men, sandwiched together and moving in unison. Only a few figures enjoy the privilege of their own shot. An old woman stands apart from the crowd, engaging in silent protest, not the fist-pumping chanting that surrounds her. One shot zooms in on an Iranian man with a camera, stationed in a tree above the protest. Heads, fists, and signs invade the periphery of the shot, but the man emerges as the clear focus — white, foggy skies provide a clean and stark backdrop for the figure while his vertical positioning physically isolates him, elevating him above the masses below. The image implicitly theorizes about the role of the documentarian, simultaneously involved in yet estranged from his subject. The image could also indicate a source for the photographs and footage after which the scene was modeled. In

a meta-cinematic reading, the man could represent Affleck himself, circumscribed into the diegesis of the film, endeavoring to faithfully represent and engage with the historical event. Through choosing an Iranian cameraman as his surrogate, Affleck disavows his own status as a mainstream Hollywood filmmaker, presuming that he sees the situation as clearly as an Iranian man.

Danger grows more salient as the protestors endeavor to break through the embassy gates. The camerawork adapts to reflect the impending threat. An unstable, hand-held camera provokes the chaos of the angry crowd. In a suspenseful close-up, the protesters cut the chains that lock the embassy gates. While all footage outside the gates appears grainy, shots of protesters traversing the embassy parking lot appear clear. The protest travels from the realm of low-quality news footage into a Hollywood blockbuster, from the streets of Tehran, lined with crumbling buildings and rusty fences, into the embassy, with its brick facade and clean metal gates. The shots that follow foreground chaos. Close-ups focus on glass shattering and crowbars tearing apart the embassy piece by piece. Through schizophrenic camerawork — rapid pans and cutting — the chaotic, adrenaline rush of a scene makes the viewer fear for American safety against the Iranian enemy.

From start to finish, *Argo* exhibits an evident tension between historical authenticity and Hollywood conventions, indicated by the way in which the film transforms Tony Mendez into a visual icon. Preparing for the fake film crew's first public

appearance, Cora Lijek combs her hair and Bob Anders affixes a Canadian flag pin to his jacket. Only Mendez is filmed half-naked, putting on and buttoning up his shirt. At the Beverly Hilton party, a tracking shot follows Mendez as he navigates a glamorous rooftop bar, fixating on his face and upper body, on the fact that the top button of his shirt is undone. In several scenes, the sun serendipitously beams light onto the side of Mendez's face, creating a shimmering aura about him. Not to mention the fact that the viewer watches Mendez successfully pull off a diverse set of roles and an even more diverse wardrobe — a Hollywood big shot button down, a CIA agent suit and tie, and a wonderfully 1970s trench coat. Moments that fetishize Mendez serve as potent reminders of the film's status as a Hollywood blockbuster.

From the moment that Mendez discovers the script for *Argo* through the creation of Studio Six, the film orientalizes the Middle East. *Argo* refers to three separate film productions — the original fake Studio Six production, the fake Studio Six production within Affleck's film, and 2012 *Argo*. Within Affleck's film, an image shows a newspaper advertisement for the inner film next to an original 1979 poster. The two look quite similar, except for the fact that the newspaper advertisement eliminates credits and enlarges and brightens the text "A Cosmic Conflagration," playing up the sci-fi spectacle aspect. Affleck's film shares similarities with the inner film, a spectacle that leverages Hollywood drama to a political end.

The script, storyboard images, and mythological source material converge to promote the image of a generic, exotic Middle East. The title of *Argo* refers to "the name of the ship on which Jason and the Argonauts sailed to rescue the Golden Fleece from the many-headed dragon holding it captive in the sacred garden" (Mendez, "A Classic Case of Deception"). In an article written for the CIA, Mendez remarks on the similarity between the mythological story and the mission to rescue the six diplomats from Iran (Mendez, "A Classic Case of Deception"). His comment transforms the Iranian revolutionary forces into the many-headed dragon. Within the film, Mendez stands on a balcony and holds a storyboard image up to the Tehrani cityscape upon his arrival in Iran. Mountain ranges that surround Tehran resemble those in the illustrations. The sounds of cars speeding below animate the spaceships in the storyboard. Through these similarities, the scene analogizes the real Tehran to that of the fake production. In an earlier sequence, Mendez picks the script for *Argo* from a pile and narrates the opening action line to Chambers and Siegel: "An exotic, Middle Eastern vibe. Women gather, offering ecstatic libations to the sky gods." The description both orientalizes and sexualizes the Middle East; female characters participate in a nonspecific but distinctly non-Western religion. When Mendez visits the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance upon arriving in Iran, the Deputy Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance calls him out: "I see. The exotic Orient. Snake charmers and flying carpets." However, the steely-eyed official delivers the potent line in a

steady, neutral tone. He seems resigned, as if his time on the job has taught him that the West will represent Iran according to its own whims without attempting to depict the country beyond stereotypes of oriental mysticism. Moreover, the *mise-en-scène* undermines the official's authority. As he looks through Mendez's documents, POV shots trace the CIA agent's gaze. A close-up settles on the peeling remains of a mural, pierced by a stray nail and a fluorescent light fixture. The shot identifies the ministry, a surrogate for Iranian art and culture, as the decrepit remains of a once-great culture. The official's words echo this point — he explains that 40% of movie theaters in Tehran showed pornography before the revolution.

Within the film, Mendez latches onto the themes of Middle Eastern sexuality and exoticism in creating Studio Six Productions. Before departing for Iran, Mendez, Chambers, and Siegel throw a glamorous promotional party at the Beverly Hilton, laden with 1970s Hollywood clichés. Before entering the hotel, the suited trio exits a limousine in slow motion as Van Halen's "Dance the Night Away" plays in the background. The first shot of the party shows an almost-naked woman in close-up. Golden chains and fabric drape across her front and back but leave her side entirely exposed. Shallow focus blurs all except for the woman's body. The camera lingers for a moment before tracking upwards across her figure, sizing her up physically before settling on her face. The aptly-timed non-diegetic soundtrack further objectifies the actress; Van Halen cries "Oh, baby baby" as the camera focuses on her exposed hips and torso.

Notably, the actress has blond hair and fair skin. Rather than hiring a Middle Eastern actress, the fake production crew chooses a woman who epitomizes Hollywood beauty standards. Lacking the appearance of a Middle Eastern woman, she appropriates Iranian culture through a costume laden with orientalist tropes. Her sparkling robe represents the luxury of a distant culture while simultaneously highlighting her sexual primitivism — her lack of understanding of and adherence to conventions of Western sexuality. She emerges both glamorous and uninhibited — a modern-day extension of European orientalist paintings — an idealized object of representation for the male, Western artist. After a few seconds, the camera loses interest and cuts to a woman wearing even less clothing — she dons a beaded and sequined garment that covers only her nipples. A mirror reveals a blurred reflection of her back. She transforms into the Aphrodite of Knidos, a sexualized image of a pagan past, made to passively receive admiration from all angles. The camera pans to reveal a set of scripts on the table, justifying the objectification of women through the mission at hand. By contrast, the men in the sequence expose no skin at all. They wear costumes evocative of Chewbacca from the Star Wars franchise or full-body robot outfits.

Simultaneously, in a dimly lit kitchen adjacent to the party, a small retro television plays news related to the Iranian Hostage Crisis. A woman, referred to as Tehran Mary in the credits, delivers a speech on the American hostages. Warm tones characterize the party — guests wear gold and the waiters

wear orange suits that match the ballroom's orange curtains. Meanwhile, a distinctly blue color palette paints the sequence in the kitchen. A primarily non-diegetic soundtrack accompanies shots of the party; the music fades only to allow for dialogue interludes. However, in the kitchen, the soundtrack leaves room for everyday noises such as silverware clinking together. Both visually and aurally, the two settings occupy seemingly non-overlapping spaces. The waiter continues about his day without stopping to acknowledge the Iranian woman on the television screen. However, the camera latches on and lingers in a close-up before cutting to a CIA agent watching the same report from Washington. Three juxtaposed screens stream content from CBS, NBC, and ABC. To the left of the Iranian woman, Jimmy Carter delivers a speech (later revealed to be about the Hostage Crisis) and to the right, protesters hold up signs that say "We want to send Shah back to Iran." Beside the screens, a map of Afghanistan harkens back to a history of CIA intervention in the Middle East. In a deeply ironic moment, a medium shot highlights a series of operatives at work while Jack O'Donnell stands arms-crossed in the foreground with a profoundly displeased facial expression. Tehran Mary delivers the impeccably-timed line: "All evidence proves that these people are spies." The certainty with which she casts all American diplomats off as spies undermines her legitimacy, but the image on-screen partially restores it, indicating a kernel of truth to her words.

While a brief sequence set in Iran focuses on Tehran Mary's speech, for the most part her words serve as background noise. Images display the slew of reporters that have come to document her — primarily the chunky film equipment that blocks their faces. RCA video cameras figure in shots of both Tehran and Hollywood, visually linking the two distant spaces. While Tehran Mary's voice trails on softly in the background, the reading of *Argo* begins. Actors deliver dialogue that comments on the situation in Iran through the thin veil of a sci-fi film. The aforementioned sexualized space princess speaks over Tehran Mary: "The fire of hope stopped burning in this galaxy long ago." The galaxy represents Iran as perceived through the eyes of Hollywood — a hopeless, faraway land. Her words negate the cries for mobilization on the television. The United States has no way of salvaging the deteriorating country — they need simply to rescue the American hostages at all costs. Continuing the metaphor, another actress delivers the following line: "He says a gravitational field that strong will kill anyone." The viewer could read the line as a metaphor for the authoritarian state as perceived by the United States, the power of Khomeini over a public that lacks the ability to think freely, the power of Khomeini and the revolutionary forces to "kill anyone." Sentimental non-diegetic string music unites Beverly Hills, Langley, and Tehran, creating a through-line between these three physically isolated spaces.

As the costumed actors recite their lines, Jimmy Carter's voice begins to fade in and out of the background —

the viewer can make out words and phrases such as “radicals” and “completely unjustified.” His voice increases to full volume before the camera cuts to the Canadian Ambassador’s residence and Tehran. The six American diplomats watch Carter’s speech with varying degrees of attention. By incorporating the escapees into the scene, the film brings the viewer’s attention back to the mission at hand — saving innocent Americans from the clutches of angry Iranians. In doing so, he reminds the viewer that the Hollywood fun and games serve a purpose beyond glamor and entertainment. On Taylor’s television, the president announces that “the United States of America will not yield to international terrorism or to blackmail.” In using buzzwords such as “terrorism,” Carter expresses the Iranian Hostage Crisis in a fundamentally un-American language, using terminology that paints Iran as an intrinsic threat to the tenets of democracy. As described by el-Aswad in “Images of Muslims in Western Scholarship and Media after 9/11,” the United States representation of Muslims shifted with the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In his essay, el-Aswad defines the concept of “New Orientalism,” the tendency to view Muslims as terroristic and antithetical to modernity and democracy (el-Aswad 41). Although Carter delivered the speech prior to 9/11, his words resonate with a culture that has come to view Islam as the enemy.

Through overlaid sounds and rapid cuts emerges a composite space that contains Hollywood, the Taylors’ residence, and the brick-walled room in which Tehran Mary

delivers her speech. All of the voices and images contradict one another. Tehran Mary seizes control of Carter’s words, describing the United States government and its CIA as “the most terrorizing organizations of all time.” The end of the scene delivers a final verdict on Tehran Mary’s words. Her phrase, “We will begin the trials and carry out the sentences,” manifests directly in physical violence. In the embassy basement, the hostages are rounded up and held at gunpoint as a man wearing a turban paces and shouts orders in Farsi. The dark, unkempt basement, lit by only fluorescent sconces, creates an ethos of fear. Images of Khomeini, broadcasted on Iranian television, implicate the ayatollah.

As Mendez’s flight approaches Iran, an extreme long shot shows the plane nearing the urban capital against the backdrop of surrounding mountain ranges. At the end of the film, a symmetrical image pictures an identical plane departing from Tehran. The two shots directly quote a storyboard image that reappears throughout the film, in which a hero and a young boy fly away from an “exotic, Middle Eastern” city on a spaceship. Through the live-action recreation of the hand-drawn image, Mendez begins the journey described within the inner film. His mission in Tehran brings to life the otherwise unpictured Studio Six production (minus the women who offer ecstatic libations to the sky gods) as well as the distant source text of Jason and the Argonauts. The storyboard prophesies the end of the film — the hero successfully rescues his helpless subjects from danger. However, Mendez’s arrival in Iran

threatens the storyboard's promise of safety. On the wall of the airport hangs the symbol of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, an arm holding up a gun, labeled with Farsi text. The poster, a graphic image like the storyboards, opens a window into an alternative, less glamorous reality. Mendez successfully passes through immigration, but not without a whiff of danger. Border police forcefully carry away a screaming man, against the protests of an indignant young woman and a crying young girl. As soon as Mendez arrives in Iran, the viewer realizes that the Iranian reality stands in opposition to the heroic Hollywood-style fake production. While the storyboard images promise a successful journey, violent posters in Iran assert the possibility of danger through the same visual language.

On the streets of Tehran, graphic images further establish an alternative narrative to the storyboard images. Mendez drives by a cloth poster that depicts a hand tearing away an American flag to reveal text reading "CIA" in menacing, elongated letters. The next shot shows the image reflected onto the taxi window, covering Mendez's face. The taxi drives by a Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Mendez watches as a trio of veiled women bite into fried drumsticks. All the while, Iranian music plays in the background. The American franchise feels out of place, but serves as a reminder that the United States profited off of the Westernization of Iran for decades leading up to the

Hostage Crisis. All of a sudden, a tracking shot stationed in the agent's point-of-view reveals a man who looks astonishingly similar to Mendez swinging from a crane. The camera oscillates between shots of Mendez, with an expression of subdued fear on his face, and POV shots of the corpse. As the car moves forward, Mendez readjusts his gaze to look out the taxi's back window. Nobody says a word.

In a high-stakes sequence, the fake film crew dons their disguises and visits the bazaar in Tehran. Kathy Stratford, the alleged production designer, takes a photograph of a man's store. He chases her down, demanding the photograph on the grounds that he did not grant her permission. Later, the man reveals the true source of his anger — the Shah "killed his son with an American gun." The sequence is shot primarily at eye-level and in close-up, welcoming the viewer into the chaos of the crowd. With frequent cuts, the position of the camera changes and within each shot, the camera pans back and forth, attempting to keep up as voices clobber each other. Light beams in through holes in the bazaar ceiling, creating a streaking effect. High levels of contrast between light and dark further contribute to the confusion that the scene provokes. Both camerawork and lighting foster an ethos of instability. The lack of subtitles turns the man's protest into unintelligible yelling in the ears of the American viewer.⁷ Between the sea of heads, the Iranian flags

⁷ This is not a unique occurrence. In the film's climactic airport scene, an aggressive member of the Revolutionary Guard pulls Mendez and the diplomats aside. English subtitles accompany Joe

Stafford's Farsi speech, but not the words of the antagonist. The viewer can only access man's violent tone and angry facial expression, not what he has to say.

that line the ceiling of the bazaar, and the display of anger at American violence, the environment recalls the storming of the embassy at the beginning of the film. The scene suggests that ordinary Iranian citizens, not just revolutionaries, hold the same anti-American beliefs and exhibit the same fanaticism shown at the beginning of the film.

Argo ends with text summarizing the outcome of the mission and the Hostage Crisis overlaid with images of Mendez's son's room. Sci-fi figurines — Spock, Chewbacca, etc. — models for Mendez's fake science fiction film, figure prominently. Later shots feature four books from the Hardy Boys series, perhaps reflecting Mendez's ability to cunningly solve seemingly impossible cases. Stars on the back wall accompany text about Mendez's Intelligence Star. The interaction of text and image personalize the history-book-style sentences, showing that a human backstory accompanies the described historical events. The final image of the film plays on Mendez's family-man appeal while also reflecting on the film at large. In a storyboard image that serves as a motif throughout the film, a young boy hugs a sci-fi hero as they fly away from a generic Middle Eastern setting on a spaceship. The image summarizes the film: hero rescues helpless Americans from Middle Eastern enemies with the cover story of a sci-fi film. However, the boy, likely meant to represent Mendez's son,

replaces the six diplomats. Although Mendez had to make the journey on his own and, as a result, suffered isolation from his family, the image etches a father-son bond into the narrative of the film.⁸ In integrating family life into an image that signifies the mission's success, the film attributes Mendez's professional triumph to familial love in a feel-good Hollywood fashion. A line about Mendez's personal life accompanies the image in the final shot: "He lives in rural Maryland with his family." The phrase recalls an earlier piece of dialogue: "Yeah, I've got a son. He lives in Virginia with his mother." After creating Studio Six Productions and acquiring screenplay rights, Mendez and Siegel share a moment of vulnerability, discussing their struggle to balance work and family. However, by the end of the film, Mendez fulfills his professional and national commitment and can therefore transition into the roles of husband and father. The first and last images of the film feature the same storyboard style. However, while the start shows a map, symbolic of the journey to come, the final shot brings the hero back home.

During the credits, President Jimmy Carter speaks about the mission. Carter's historical narration establishes a bookend with the film's prologue. During the opening moments of the film, a disembodied narrator discusses what happened before *Argo*; to close, Carter summarizes what happened during and after. Focus shifts from Iran to the United States. Whereas

⁸ In fact, Mendez's family plays a huge part in the mission's success. Mendez originally dreams up the idea of the fake film production company when watching *Battle for the Planet of the Apes* (1973) with his son. At first, Joe Stafford exhibits extreme

distrust towards Mendez. However, he eventually softens up when Mendez confesses his real name and discusses his parents, wife, and son.

the prologue splices together documentary and cinematic elements, the credits let history shine. While the level voice recounts a tale of kings, Jimmy Carter recounts his personal experience with the Iranian Hostage Crisis. Photos of Jimmy Carter with Mendez and the six escapees parallel the image of the anti-Carter poster from the opening sequence. Carter transforms from a villain, a concentration of American abuse of the Iranian public, into a smiling national figurehead. While the beginning of the film makes efforts to grapple with an uncomfortable past, the narrative of Western heroism triumphs at the end of the film. Jokingly (but with a clear tinge of regret), Carter comments on how he wishes he could have taken credit for the classified mission. The Hostage Crisis famously impacted Carter's reelection campaign, as the electorate largely perceived the president's foreign policy with respect to Iran as weak. The ending transforms *Argo* from an isolated piece of historical fiction into a record of national politics. Carter's summarization of the film grants *Argo* a badge of legitimacy, a presidential endorsement.

Despite concentrating on a thirty-year-old historical event, *Argo* was released in a time of ongoing tension between the United States government and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Shaw and Jenkins cite Ahmadinejad's displeasure at the film's stereotypical representation of "Islamist fanatics and its portrayal of the Middle East as a playground for Western trickery" (Shaw and Jenkins 110). The film was initially banned as anti-Iranian propaganda. Mohammed

Hosseini, the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, spoke out against the offensiveness of the film, and the Iranian government even made efforts to sue Hollywood. The Arts Bureau, affiliated with the Islamic Republic, announced plans to produce a counter-film on the Hostage Crisis to correct the image presented in *Argo* (Shaw and Jenkins 112). Unfortunately, the film never came to see the light. To make matters worse, at the time of *Argo*'s release, the CIA updated its website to herald Mendez's mission as a "valuable lesson in counterterrorism" (Shaw and Jenkins 110). In interviews, Mendez contextualized *Argo* in terms of 2012 Iran, which he saw as a potent international threat (Shaw and Jenkins 110).

Hollywood-government cooperation is not unique to *Argo*. The same year, the CIA engaged in the production of Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). Like the CIA, the Pentagon has an office in Hollywood. Over 1,000 films have received aid in the form of consultations or permission to use Pentagon facilities and equipment; over 800 have similarly cooperated with the Department of Defense, including Hollywood hits such as *Iron Man* (2008) and *The Terminator* (1984). Beyond the big screen, television shows such as *NCIS* and *24* have received support from the FBI and the White House (Alford). Cinema can function as a political weapon, reshaping the attitudes of the film-going public towards historical events, government agencies, contemporary politics, and even certain ethnic groups. With historical and political fiction films, it is worth considering the various underlying motives, as well as the

accuracies and inaccuracies contained within. Directors of historical fiction inevitably toe the line between artistic license and the responsibility to represent history accurately and without evident bias. Due to CIA participation in the production process, the film delivers a far-from-objective account of the Iranian Hostage Crisis while simultaneously parading as authentic. Seen by millions of people worldwide, blockbuster films have the power to create racial stigmas and to influence social and political dynamics. By referring to Iranians as “bastards” and depicting them as barbarians, *Argo* oversteps its bounds, etching the stereotype of the villainous Iranian into the public consciousness.

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