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WARFARE ON THE CONCEPTUAL BATTLESPACE[1]: THIRD CINEMAS

TRANSFORMATION OF WAR ON TERROR DISCOURSE

by

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[1] Forest, James J. F., and Joshua Geltzer. *Influence warfare: how terrorists and governments fight to shape perceptions in a war of ideas*. Westport, Connecticut.: Praeger Security International, 2009. Print.

ABSTRACT

American Popular film on the War on Terror plays a powerful role establishing cultural and political discourses surrounding the War on Terror. Furthermore, the attempts of liberal films as a source of critique of American Hollywood conservative War on Terror films are insufficient. I argue that Third Cinema from the Middle East provides a necessary counter-discourse in providing platforms for alternative discussions regarding definitions of terrorism and the production of the Orientalist other.

> "By dismissing popular cinema as harmless entertainment, it becomes more resonant. U.S. cinema rarely creates images of itself as it is, but it's been able to competently show U.S. society as it wants to see itself."[2] -Andre Bazin

American War on Terror films sustain arenas that produce a damaging War on Terror discourse. The knowledge produced by War on Terror or post 9/11 films establishes "truths" that have real effects in the world**.** These films establish what is publicly discussed and debated in U.S. political discourse and the broader global politics of terrorism. Film is at the center of political-cultural narrative production because it shapes discourse by relaying projected narratives, notions of national-self consciousness, and shared beliefs through popular ideology and images. For the purposes of this paper, I use the Foucauldian definition of discourse, defined as a "way of representing the knowledge about […] a particular topic at a particular historical moment" (Hall 1997:44). It refers to the "forms of knowledge or powerful sets of

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[2] Jackson, Richard. "Constructing Enemies: Islamic Terrorism in
Political and Academic Discourse." *Government & Opposition Government and Opposition* 42.3 (2007): 394-426. Web. 16 Nov. 2015. pp, 207.

assumptions, expectations and explanations, governing mainstream social and cultural practices." (Baxter 2003:7). In other words, discourse regulates the way a topic can be talked about meaningfully in a particular culture at a particular point in history" (Hodges, 6). The western constructed War on Terror discourse establishes the unidentified dangerous Other in contrast to a western civilization, western ideals, and western social order. At the center of the discourse of the War on Terror is Orientalism, a lens that Western intellectuals use to construct the "East" as the exotic Other, by distorting and romanticizing representations of the "East" that reinforce Western domination and myths of superiority.[3] Concepts of Orientalism are repeated in popular media, with Muslim bodies portrayed as villains, fanatics, individuals without agency, or the unidentified dead.[4] The War on Terror discourse is politicized and real because reflects events that take place in the world, and the discourse infuses events with meaning, establishing widespread social understandings, which constitute social realities.[5] The discourse ultimately shapes the western public's conceptions of the War on Terror, terrorism, and the terrorist. These constructed conceptions are created without analyzing how motivations of terror are formulated, how merits of justice and injustice are established, and ignore individual relationships of consent, and absences of consent.[6] By controlling the discourse of terrorism, the creator can also choose, construct, and identify the terrorist Other to the public.

War on Terror films produced in the United States construct two War on Terror narratives. The first is identifiable by its War on Terror propaganda. These films are

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[3] Jack Shaheen, Reel Bad Arabs: *How Hollywood Vilifies a People*
[4] Ibid.
[5] Hodges, 5.
[6] Ahmad, 17.

generally intensely violent, extremely racialized, and present countless paradoxes of "good vs. evil" with relation to the West and the Oriental Other. In contrast, liberal War on Terror films produce narratives that question the legitimacy of the War on Terror and warfare itself. Additionally, while master tropes of "good vs. evil" are not always presented, dichotomies between American innocence and the harsh and violent world are generated. Moreover, American aggressiveness is disconnected from the American people and transferred on to the state, severing the relationship between ordinary citizens and the real, destructive military operations of the U.S. government. Likewise, liberal War on Terror films potentially undercut War on Terror discourse. However, while liberal War on Terror depictions may not present bluntly racist and violent images of American exceptionalism, both narratives arrive at the same conclusions about American innocence in the fight against global terrorism. These War on Terror narratives perpetuate misrepresentations of the relationship between the American individual and their relationship with the politics of knowledge production and discourses of the War on Terror.

Third Cinema Films from the Middle East successfully critique both the conservative War on Terror films and its liberal counterparts. Rooted in the Cuban Revolution (1959) and Brazil's Cinema Nôvo, Third Cinema conceptualizes connections between the socio-cultural, in contrast to contemporary European aesthetic ideologies. This is accomplished by focusing on the "National", revealing divisions and stratifications within national formations such as class and political antagonisms.[7] In 1986, during a three-day conference addressing the idea of a Third Cinema and its

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[7] Pines, Jim, and Paul Willemen. *Questions of Third Cinema*. London: BFI Pub., 1989. pp,5.

relevance in contemporary film culture, The Edinburgh International Film Festival defined Third Cinema as "film grounded in an understanding of dialectical relationships between social existence and cultural practice, recognition of layered-ness and of cultural historical formations."[8] By producing counter-narratives and deconstructing binaries of the War on Terror, Third Cinema from the Middle East exposes the colonial and imperialist project of the War on Terror and its liberal cinematic representations.

The genres of Hollywood conservative and liberal War on Terror films repeat and legitimize violence of dominant representational regimes. This is accomplished by rationalizing the continuation of war by providing a venue for the reproduction of these discourses. In these films, Arabs and Muslims are stereotyped and reduced to a limited spectrum of characterizations compared to those offered to citizens from the first world. The Orientalized Other is framed as either violent or victimized, both reducible and disposable stereotypes lacking humanity and agency. In popular American film, Arabs and Muslims are subject to the controlling and objectifying imperial gaze, viewed through the lens of the west.[9]

Every year, a plethora of action-packed, war mongering propaganda films are produced in the United States. At this moment in history they engage with the War on Terror and the post 9/11 era. These films construct dangerous narratives that dispose of the complex realities surrounding war and instead focus on constructing realities that simplify complex histories and contexts. Films such as *Black Hawk Down (2001)*, *Lone Survivor (2014)*, and *Act of Valor (2012)*, transform the complex conflict of the War on Terror into a "good vs. evil" narrative, reaffirming and upholding American moral and

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[8] Ibid, 2.
[9] McSweeney, Terence. *The 'war on Terror' and American Film 9/11*
Frames per Second. N.p.: Edinburgh UP, 2014.pp, 34.

militaristic superiority. They depict American soldiers as the principle victims of the War on Terror, producing a cognitive dissonance in the post 9/11 era, where the War on Terror is an American experience based on American victimhood and American strength. Finally, they perpetuate myths of U.S. exceptionalism and pre-eminence around the globe, which is reaffirmed by the power and moral authority of the United States in the national imaginary.[10]

American Sniper is an effective example of conservative cinema. Directed by Clint Eastwood, the film presents narratives of U.S. exceptionalism and sustains ideologies of U.S. uniqueness and divinity. *American Sniper* explores the "real" experiences of the U.S. Navy SEAL sniper, Chris Kyle. Throughout the film, there are narratives of U.S. exceptionalism and the dramatization of U.S. supremacy in contrast to an evil "Islamic Terrorist Other." The individualized and central perspective of the film, which focuses on the American soldier experience, best exemplifies this. In the first ten minutes of the film, the "good vs. evil" narrative is established. Chris catches a news update on television at home about an enemy attacking American Embassy's in Tanzania and Kenya. Those responsible for the attacks are simply identified as an unidentified enemy a part of someone's war against the United States. Chris immediately responds, "Look what they did to us." The next day, Chris is seen applying to the Navy SEALs. This is a deeply troubling message, as no context is provided and the response presented from the atrocity is armed combat. Chris' SEALs training depicts a religious and patriarchal dominated world, with God and country portrayed as the victims of exogenous violence in need of protection. The Narrative refocuses on Chris's post 9/11 role, as he balances his family and military duties. War starts for Chris in Fallujah. After

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[10] Ibid,205.

the city is evacuated, his crew is tasked with going door to door in search of "the bad guys," who are described as the only remaining middle-aged males. This is because everyone "good" has already been evacuated. Finally, the Other has been identified as an Iraqi militant. Shortly after, the audience is shown a woman and her child approaching an American tank with an explosive. Chris is tasked with sniping the mother and her child in order to protect his fellow soldiers. This exchange of grenade from mother to child implies the moral shortcomings and savagery of the Other, because the mother isn't protecting her child, but instead putting him directly in danger. Chris ultimately shoots both the child and mother despite his hesitation, signaling his moral character, which transcends his immediate danger. As the film progresses it focuses on American snipers and their mission to kill Zarqawi, also know as, "The Butcher", a ruthless savage who seeks to rule the insurgent population through death threats and torture. This portrayal of Iraqis limits their depictions to evil savages with no moral compass, killing Americans and their own as well. Alternatively, Iraqis are also depicted as victims of a conflict without agency, at the mercy of the American soldier. As the film progresses, the audience follows Chris' journey back and forth between his family and military tours. In addition to the victimization of the moral American soldier, Chris' wife's monologues are limited to her suffering as a result or her husband's commitment to the war. At the heart of the conflict, the white woman becomes the victim of the global War on Terror. The audience is moved to sympathize with the single mother of two, despite the extreme war depicted in other scenes. Only evil Iraqi's are portrayed throughout this film, while Americans are either under attack or encounter resistance through their attempt to bring justice. In one scene, they ambush a house where "The Butcher" is believed to be:

discovering cutoff heads and severed limbs. Despite their attempt to kill "The Butcher", Americans are faced with more contempt from local insurgents. Ultimately, Chris takes out "The Butcher", a man who also killed one of his closest friends. This sequence encourages ideologies of revenge and eye-for-eye justifications of violence and terror. After accomplishing his goal of sniping "The Butcher", Chris decides he's ready to come home. In the last fifteen minutes, Chris finally embraces his victimhood when he doesn't immediately return home, and instead spends alone time decompressing at a local bar. Chris for the first time sheds tears and expresses empathetic emotions. The film ultimately focuses on the victimization of the American soldier and the challenges of post-combat survival. There is danger in limiting a global international conflict to the victimhood of an active American soldier driven by his own ideals. This narrative presents a dichotomy where Arab characters act in response to the American soldier and in response to the consequences of the soldier's actions. As a collection, these narratives and images of the War on Terror become a central part of U.S. consciousness. Post 9/11 film depictions of the War on Terror provide a battleground on which to interpret the war that profoundly shapes how it is viewed now and in the future.[11] The constructed reality legitimizes negative, one-dimensional depictions of all Muslims and Arabs as terrorists.

War film propaganda presumably stands in sharp contrast to the anti-war film. These films attempt to question the nationalist fervor surrounding war and make political statements challenging the legitimacy of war and warfare itself. However, they still traffic in tropes that actively dehumanize the Other or depict an Other without will or agency. Contemporary liberal War on Terror films perpetuate violent images and violence shown on bodies of color, escalating the stakes of real world violence. Films like *The Hurt*

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[11] Ibid, 63.

Locker and *Syriana* sustain anti-war narratives while reproducing and normalizing representations of Arab passivity and victimhood. Simply questioning violence does not challenge the structure of domination and systemic violence that is enacted on Arab bodies. Furthermore, these anti-war narratives allow American audiences and the global West who may condemn and avoid violence to disconnect their relationship with the hegemonic structures in place. On screen anti-war films can present racism and violence as interpersonal problems of "good vs. evil" instead of systematic forms of oppression and hegemony.[12] These anti-war films are extremely powerful because audiences can voyeuristically observe violence – even condemn it – without participating in it. The violence is digestible and safe because there is a distance between the perpetrators of the violence and what is being witnessed on a movie screen, establishing a norm of how a group is depicted.[13] *The Hurt Locker* and *Syriana reproduce* the unidentified Other and present an inactive or victimized Other who is often passive and without the resources to counter their victimization. This genre is extremely explosive for the propagation of the terrorist Other, revealing the extent to which liberal and conservative films consequently reproduce similar War on Terror narratives and discourses.

The Hurt Locker, directed by Kathryn Bigelow begins with the immediate separation of soldier and war, instead associating war with the state. The first image presented on screen is a quote by Chris Hedges, "The rush of battle is often a potent and lethal addiction, for war is a drug." The quote fades until only "War is a drug." remains on screen. In this film, the American soldier is the focal point of the War on Terror. The film depicts Iraqis without agency; they watch from the sidelines as a war is fought on

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[12] Berger, Martin A. *Seeing through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography.* Berkeley: U of California, 2011. Print.47.
[13] Ibid, 39.

their behalf. Iraqis are depicted as outsiders among their own society, as the movie focuses on Will and his team who are brought in to disable Improvised Explosive Devices (IED's). The film focuses on Will's fantastic skill of disabling IED's and the rush he receives from his job. His passion for his occupation is contrasted with that of his partners', Owen and Sanborn, who equate their job with their imminent death. The film lacks persistent and direct ideological propaganda, by suggesting that the soldiers do not necessarily believe they are helping any cause of justice or freedom, but instead accomplishing a job they happen to succeed at. For example, during an interaction with a potential suicide bomber, Will confronts a man with his gun who is speeding towards him. After Will stops him without using violence, other soldiers accost the man. Will comments, "If he wasn't an insurgent, he sure is now." The dialogue suggests that this film makes no attempt to be pro-war. However, the film does not attempt to provide context or perspective, but chooses an American soldier as its focal point, ultimately supporting and furthering a U.S.-centric War on Terror discourse. Every scene focuses on Will's attempt to dismember an IED. These scenes are parceled out with efforts to disassociate the soldier from the war. For example, in an effort to show the moral character of the soldier, Will is shown interacting with a local boy named Beckham, he shows kindness to the young boy and gives him five dollars for beating him in a pick-up soccer game. These moments provide parallels of kindness, humanity and compassion, indicating that Americaness is not defined by war.

As the movie progresses, a new type of Other is introduced, an Other that can't be identified, except by its evil savagery. In the film, Will and his group are directly attacked and surprised by enemy combatants. They are not engaging in any warfare and instead

are tasked with helping fellow British soldiers who get a flat tire in the desert. The scene progresses into a stand off with a group of Iraqi snipers, who are depicted from a distance, contrasted with close-up scenes and first hand shots that allow the audience to experience the dangerous position of the American soldier. The American is separated from the individuals controlling the war and are presented instead as victims who are trying to survive the war. In this scene they're stranded in the desert, nearing dehydration. They wait silently and patiently until an opportunity arises to kill their enemy. As the movie approaches its final hour, the IED team embarks on a standard mission to pick up unexploded ordinances (explosive weapons). The mission is expected to be a simple inspection, but instead results in the thorough exploration of a building that has not yet been inspected by security. Will and his team are therefore tasked with inspecting the building themselves. However, during their inspection they come across a young boy's dead body with detonators embedded in his skin. Will immediately thinks the body is Beckham's, the young boy he interacted with earlier. He is faced with a moral decision and questions his obligation to the boy's body. After this experience, Will seeks out Beckham in an effort to confirm the identity of the dead boy. Will has a lapse in judgment in his fight for humanity and follows a local man to what he thinks is Beckham's house. Once he arrives, he is violently pushed out by the female of the household for trespassing. Will quickly returns back to his base.

Shortly thereafter, Will discovers that Beckham is still alive. As Beckham tries to engage Will, he is quickly turned away and ignored. This is an interesting sequence of scenes because while the film depicts Will's actions as morally based and good intentioned, he ends up creating unnecessary confusion and conflict. However, despite

the consequences of his actions, Will is portrayed as both a moral character and a victimized soldier of a war greater than himself. This is a troubling narrative that sustains hegemonic power dynamics of war, the production of the Other, and damaging discourses of terrorism. These narrative center U.S. military power as a necessary and moral force in the region. While attempting to sustain a point of view experience so the audience can engage with the psychological and internal experiences of the protagonist, Staff Sargent William James' experiences ultimately perpetuate dangerous narratives of the War on Terror. For example, there is no explanation for the purpose of the war or the contempt and resistance American soldiers receive from the local population. Additionally, no Iraqi gets to speak about their individual experiences. The film portrays the United States' role in Iraq as one tasked with saving and protecting Iraqi's. As a result, the film takes an ideological approach in addressing the conflict and suggests that the United States' mission in Iraq is distinctly humanitarian. The humanitarian role of the U.S. military in Iraq detaches itself from a sense of political and historical context. While it is not as sanctimonious as conservative war film, the liberal film shares a common U.S. imperial gaze.[14] The film narrows the war, by framing it between the existential confrontation of man and deadly threat, allowing the viewer to experience destruction without guilt.[15]

Syriana, directed by Stephen Gaghan, like *The Hurt Locker*, produces similar political and cultural consequences. *Syriana* follows three major story lines that interact on a global and political scale. The story lines engage the CIA and the political strength they play in supporting foreign leaders, specifically those in the Middle East. Another plot explores the life of Pakistani immigrant workers in the Persian Gulf and the

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[14] McSweeney, 67.
[15] Ibid, 68.

segregation and poverty they face. The final story line follows the prospect of a merger between two major oil companies, Connex and Killen and the potential profits they hope to reap by extracting oil from the Middle East. The film attempts to provide context and explanation for the cause of political terrorism, by exploring the poverty of Pakistani immigrants and the interconnectedness of American politics. The movie begins in Tehran, where an American CIA member completes an arms deal with an Iranian. However, during the exchange, a missile ultimately gets sold to an unknown dealer, thus circulating a deadly weapon on the global market. This story line becomes convoluted by other stories focusing on the merger between two oil companies, a merger that would impact workers in over 160 countries. Lastly, the film explores The CIA's attempt to assassinate the son of a current Arab leader. As an exchange of power is expected to occur, the CIA commits to killing the leader's eldest son, over his younger, as the CIA view the eldest son as a threat to their political scheme of control over the Middle East. As a parallel and consequence to American actions, it is suggested through the immigrants' narrative that terrorism isn't simply an action in which the fanatic Other instigates, but suggests that environments which foster poverty, alienation, and segregation produce terrorists. The movie further depicts the refuge and protection that Islamist extremism might provide to individuals who are marginalized by society. For example, a local Mosque is seen as a refuge for Muslim immigrants, who interpret the Quran as a call for the amalgamation of state and religion in contrast to liberal society, which represents and produces massive inequality and extreme poverty. This alternative narrative is valuable because context is provided to explain the actions of characters that are often presented without one. However, in spite of the film's depiction of Muslims in

ways that are thought provoking and sometimes overturn common stereotypes, they still are constrained by their opposition to the American.

This type of film allows viewers to imagine they're being offered an intelligent lesson about global power relations, yet one that they still are not able to articulate, grasp, and engage with at a political level.[16] While these films condemn violence and generate sympathy and empathy, they do not critique or challenge the norms of underlying power structures that produce social inequalities. In both anti-war and pro-war films, the agency is given to the West in its role of producing violence or 'attempting' to ameliorate or critique the attempt at amelioration. Spectacles of violence enacted on the terrorist Other are produced by both perspectives and allow no room for depictions of Arabs and/or Muslims as a group or individuals with agency.

Third Cinema presents alternative War on Terror discourses by exposing and deconstructing normalized binaries and their hegemonic imperial productions of violence. Third Cinema actively counters the discourse of the conservative post 9/11 narrative by exposing the constructed binaries of terrorism and refocusing the War on Terror discourse on the systematic social struggles underlying terrorism. By re-focusing the discourse on active participants who are systematically erased of identity and agency by liberal War on Terror cinema, Third Cinema supports the agency of discriminated and marginalized Arab groups. Furthermore, much of the imagery in these films banish the West and instead depict Iraqis as forceful actors shaping their own narrative. The audience is not presented with dichotomies of good and evil, but presented with characters of agency that are embedded in contexts, histories, and identities.

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[16] Ibid, 4.

Turtles Can Fly and *Ahlaam* are productions without excessive dialogue that reproduce troubling and thought provoking images. Instead of commercially produced images of war, the films portray a more nuanced and gut-wrenching version of how war is being experienced by individuals with agency, despite common depictions of these groups as the victims or enemies of the West. Furthermore, these films do not demonize the West, but effectively portray the consequences and effects of the War on Terror amid identifiable and active individuals by foregrounding the agency of Iraqis on screen.

Turtles Can Fly, the first film to be made in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein*,* is imaginative and exploratory in nature. Directed by Bahman Ghobadi, *Turtles Can Fly* presents a unique perspective, focusing on a Kurdish refugee camp on the Iraqi-Turkish border. The film exposes the survival techniques of a community of children with countless injuries, lost limbs, and broken bones, who support themselves by clearing minefields. The film humanizes a community that is usually stereotyped and depicts the unimaginable experiences of displaced children. The film strategically focuses on a group of children, the most innocent and disconnected from the socio-political realities they experience, but the most impacted in their daily lives. Despite their victim-like status, *Turtles Can Fly* presents the group of orphans as agents of their everyday lives. The children in the community are capable of supporting themselves. They have a method of trade and act as a strong community, taking care of each other and looking after each other. Simultaneously, because the focus of the film is the immediate impact war and destruct has on children, the audience cannot help but empathize and sympathize with the most innocent members of society, forcing connections of humanity between the audience and those depicted on screen.

The film begins with an elder reflecting on the status of his community, "Look what Saddam has done to us. We have no water, no electricity, and no schools. They have deprived us from the sky. They don't let our TV's work to see when the war will start." In anticipation, the refugee community attempts to set up satellites. While the village is divided by tribal groups, social and political structures make the relationships between groups more difficult. Furthermore, artificial borders between Iraq and Turkey have been recreated and redrawn further complicating tribal structures. In one of the first scenes, Satellite, the young protagonist sets up a television for the local village leaders, hoping to learn when the war will begin. However, the television channel is in English and no one can understand. On the television, the audience see's President Bush on screen along with the headline, "CONFRONTING TERROR." This is ironic as we see peaceful Iraqis watching as they themselves are Otherized on national television. The relationship between Satellite and the other children is hierarchical and in many ways he exploits them and uses them to make money off of their mine collection, which he then sells for profit. However, it is also clear that there is a relationship of trust and friendship between Satellite and the others. The film further explores the insurmountable hardships and unimaginable realities of the community as the audience learns more about the orphaned children. Throughout the movie there is an underlying hope that their lives will change as a result of the American invasion and the downfall of Saddam Hussein. Towards the end of the film, American helicopters arrive in the sky dispersing pamphlets that read: "It's the end of injustice, misfortune and hardship. We are your best friends and brothers. Those against us are our enemies. We will make this country a paradise. We are here to take away your sorrows. We are the best in the world." After this occurs, the children are

tasked with further hardships despite what is written on the pamphlets. Among other narratives, what makes this movie interesting is the magic and mystical nature that is intertwined between seemingly realistic experiences. Among the villagers is a boy, named Hengov who has the ability to make "predictions". Hengov brings to the film flash backs of past atrocities, current despair, and future war. Hengov ultimately predicts the arrival of American soldiers and the fall of Saddam Hussein. His predictions portray images of American soldiers roaming the streets of Iraq, the fall of Saddam's statute, along with military tanks and warplanes. Accordingly, the Americans arrive shortly after Hengov's prediction. As the final scene approaches, we are left with Satellite and his friend watching from the side as American troops arrive with army cars and weapons, encroaching on their territory. Satellite is no longer excited about the Americans as he used to be, realizing his despair may persist, despite the arrival the Americans.

Turtles Can Fly succeeds as Third Cinema because it produces a discourse moot of artificial and simplified binaries. The film is powerful because it explores the material realities and conditions of the refugee children. Their reality is a product of complex socio-political oppressions from their geographical society and the broader global hegemony of international relations and politics. The children and their conditions are a product of complicated political relationships, reconstructed geographical boundaries, and economic inequality. There is no good or evil that can singularly be identified as the culprit or savior of their conditions, and the American occupation plays no role in ameliorating their reality or truly worsening it either. By suggesting and situating the reality of the children before and after American involvement, ideas of Terrorism become constructed distractions produced by the Western world. If the audience is truly forced to

experience and visualize groups of innocent children with severed body parts or even experience the rape of a child and the emotions she experiences from the hate she has for her child as a result of a violent and forced childbirth, the audience must question where violence originates. The intense violence in fact is not terrorist Other, but the oppression and destruction of communities that are continually impacted by global politics, but who play no role in those oppressive structures to begin with.

Ahlaam, directed by Mohamed Al-Daradji and filmed on location in Baghdad in 2004, explores the interweaving narratives of the past and present of three characters under Saddam's dictatorship (1998) and amidst the American occupation in Baghdad. Shot in a Rossellini realism style, the film process for this production is a representation of activism as film. The Iraqi filmmaker simultaneously held his camera and an AK-47 for safety precaution. Additionally, someone from his cast was kidnapped and at one point the crew was beaten and lined up to be shot by insurgents.[17] The film explores the interconnected lives of Ali Hussein, Ahlaam, and Mehdi beginning in 1998 spanning till 2004. The film presents different representations of Iraqis. Instead of the Iraqi terrorist, the audience is introduced to Ali Hussein a soldier who is sent to fight on the Iraqi-Syrian boarder, Ahlaam, a young woman attending the University of Baghdad who is betrothed to an anti-Baathist activist, and Mehdi, a young man who has recently passed his medical exams and hopes to become a doctor. The film produces a discourse of diversity and counter-narratives to the liberal discourse that depicts Iraqis as victims of Saddam Hussein or terrorism, ultimately limiting the identities of individual Iraqis. The film further critiques the reign of Saddam Hussein and explores how each character encounters limits of individual freedom and state violence. For example, while Mehdi

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[17] *Ahlaam*. Dir. Mohamed Al Daradji. 2006. DVD.

passes his medical exams, the audience learns that despite his test scores he will have to fight in the army because his father had complications with the Baathist regime. As time passes, the viewer is transported to 2004 during the U.S. occupation and Mehdi has become an in-house resident at a psychiatric asylum. Both Ali and Ahlaam also cross paths at the asylum as both characters are accused and condemned for conspiring against the Baath party. For example, after a U.N. attack in 1998, Ali ends up on the wrong side of the Syrian boarder and is discovered by Iraqi soldiers who accuse him of being a traitor. Similarly, Ahlaam is sent to an Asylum on her wedding day as a consequence of her association with her husband, who is captured by Baath party members at her wedding. All patients are hospitalized in response to their resistance to the Baath party. The film presents interconnected moments of history as the audience is presented with continual chaos and destruction produced by the U.N. Security Council and U.S. involvement in Iraq during Operation Desert Fox. The audience is then presented with Bagdad in 2003, two days before the fall of Saddam Hussein and the U.S. occupation. By presenting these two episodes of violence, the audience is forced to acknowledge that violence is never an isolated event, and in fact all wars must be contextualized and grounded in history. The focal point of the film becomes the asylum, where all characters and their stories converge. The asylum is then bombed as a result of internal and external chaos and the story continues as chaos is unleashed on the city and the most vulnerable members of society are left wandering around Baghdad amidst confusion and violence. The asylum provides a provocative metaphor for the internal and managed chaos within Baghdad, but also explores the explosive nature that external intervention produces, suggesting that events are never isolated and are indefinitely connected. The

remainder of the film follow's Mehdi's attempt with Ali's assistance, to piece back together the destruction of the explosion and find the patients that escaped the asylum. Ali proves helpful and discovers many lost people. The film switches focus onto a disheveled Ahlaam, who is lost, both physically and in the daydream of being with her husband on her wedding day. The audience is frightened for Ahlaam as a dishonest and unkind man takes advantage of her vulnerable state and tricks her into isolation and rapes her. Once he is finished the man and friends throw her out of a car as they speed through Baghdad. Eventually, Ali finds Ahlaam and attempts to take care of her. On their way back to the asylum, they are separated and shot at by insurgents with one of them killing Ali, leaving Ahlaam confused and alone. In the chaos it is shown that the most innocent and alienated from conflict become victims, both mentally and physically. Ahlaam continues to wander through the streets, until her mother finds her. Despite her mother's attempt to protect Ahlaam, she and her family are separated by a group of American soldiers who, in an attempt to create security, produce more chaos. Ahlaam escapes to an abandoned building occupied by American soldiers. Her family attempts to enter the building to help her, but they are attacked by soldiers who are supposed to be protecting Ahlaam and her family from insurgents. Faced with chaotic white noise and despair, Ahlaam climbs to the top of the building surrounded by American soldiers. At the top she is seen smiling and breathing more clearly. The picture fades to black as the audience is left with war helicopters across an orange sky. Before the credits begin to roll the audience is exposed to a dedication, "The film is dedicated to the victims of wars, dictatorships, and terror worldwide, especially to the Iraqi people." The dedication is extremely important because the film questions the source of violence within the War on

Terror. The film provokes a new discourse of terrorism and suggests terror is constantly being produced by different agents such as societal structures, dictators, Nation States, or debilitating forms of health care, such as mental institutions. This knowledge of oppression and destruction is imperative because it is not painted as black and white. These realities are layered forms of oppression and expose the hegemonic nature of both liberal and conservative Western cinema by suggesting that the solution to the War on Terror isn't identifying the good or the evil, but unraveling power structures that produce constant realities of inequality, danger, and insanity.

The War on Terror demands the manipulation of knowledge and narratives, allowing for the control of public discourse and the circulation of ideologies among internal and external audiences. In order to compete on the conceptual battlespace, "…The counterterrorist government must aim to reveal the unappealing nature of the terrorist group and the impossibility of its achieving its objectives through the use of violence" (Forest and Geltzer, 347). The conceptual battlespace represents the realm of the war that does not involve physical destruction, but the battle of competing narratives, discourses, and knowledge. In a War on Terror, the control of knowledge is imperative for the perpetuation of war and the production of a violent and dangerous Other. This is accomplished by undercutting the image and ideology of the "enemy". These tools are essential in the conceptual battle space because they are determinants of the control of knowledge and power and play a major role in cinema's impact on society. The discourse of terrorism, counterterrorism and terrorist expertise obliterates all historical processes that might have produced terrorists and acts of terror in the first place.[18] Film shapes our

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[18] Redfield, Marc. *The Rhetoric of Terror: Reflections on 9/11 and the War on Terror*. New York: Fordham UP, 2009.pp., 52.

cultural understanding of the past, an influence that derives not only from cinema's ability to recreate the past in sensual, mimetic form, but also from its tendency to arouse critical and popular controversy that resonates throughout the public sphere.[19] Liberal War on Terror cinema actively controls these centers of public discourse and narrative without the blatant use of propaganda. While they many not be actively demonizing Muslim or Arab characters, the films are still embedded with hegemonic colonial discourses and incorporate damaging notions of identity through the good war narrative, notions of the long war, the "civilization vs. barbarism" narrative, American innocence, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the popular binary of "good vs. evil".[20] These films marginalize and criminalize alternative versions of the same history and accomplish that by mediating and filtering knowledge and information in an effort to neutralize and normalize constructed binaries of "we versus them"; "They are secretive, cowardly, primitive, inflexible; terrorists, followers of Islam. We are an open society, honorable, sophisticated, and committed to the global conversation and to respectful dialogue. We stand up in place and identify ourselves; they are anonymous and everywhere" (Simpson, 131). In contrast, Third Cinema generates narratives that question and transform War on Terror discourse by exposing liberal unambiguous and digestible images and replacing them with insight into the complex social dynamics of the War on Terror. By producing stories that cannot fit into tight dichotomous narratives of "good vs. evil", the normalized victimization and passive nature of specific groups is discarded in an effort to present alternative and holistic experiences of the global War on Terror. Furthermore, many perspectives are presented in individuals' attempts to avoid violence

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[19] McSweeney,198.
[20] Ibid, 41.

and combat terrorism that is produced not only by individuals, but the Nation State. This type of film making effectively transforms War on Terror discourse by reflecting the self in the production of terror and the unidentified Other. Where the liberal War on Terror film protects the audience from violence. Third Cinema refracts the imaging of the Other as an encounter of the self, implicating the self (West) as a contributing and complacent figure in the global War on Terror, forcing the audience to question their own relationship with the violence presented on screen.

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