The abject/the terrorist/ the reel Arab – a point of intersection

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Julia Kristeva (1982) argues that the abject not only lies outside the self but also functions as its opposition. The abject is ‘immoral, sinister [and] scheming’ (Kristeva 1982). Furthermore, abjection is the state of revulsion that is a threat to the being of the self as it blurs the boundaries between the subject and object, leading to its destruction. The abject becomes the other, the source of fear. Abject representations of terrorists post-9/11 have flooded the media. These images of abjection, however, are problematic as they solidify the ugly image of the Hollywood Arab, in which Arabs are generally viewed as one whole mass: as Lina Khatib (2006) observes Arabs ‘are not assigned a particular nationality or even a particular Arabic accent or dialect’. The terrorist’s image conforms to the modality set by film, and by mirroring the reel image¹ it obfuscates the line between the real and the unreal. This paper proposes that such portrayals have been successful in placing the Arab within the abject, a priori not human. Initially, the paper will outline the portrayal of the Arab in film, before examining the point at which the images of the reel Arab and the real terrorist interconnect through a study of a number of terrorist images vis-à-vis these reel portrayals, and ultimately show how the images of terrorists aired in the news media have not deviated from these preset stereotypes.

Jack Shaheen has documented Hollywood misrepresentations of Arabs in two of his books *Reel Bad Arabs* and *Guilty: Hollywood’s Verdict on Arabs after 9/11*, two comprehensive studies, in which he analyzed at least 1150 films (Shaheen, 2008, 2009). Shaheen (2008) argues that Arabs ‘remain the most maligned group in the history of Hollywood’ and that malicious ‘stereotypes equating Islam and Arabs with violence have endured for more than a century’. The Arab is always the evil other outside of the self, outside of civilization and needs to be defeated; s/he is physically menacing and repellent. This abjection has to be contained. According to Kristeva (1982), within abjection lies a dark and violent revolt at being, which is directed against a threat that ‘seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside’ and culminates in a violent mourning for a lost object. Tim Jon Semmerling

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(2006) argues how the unsavory portrayal of the Arab in American film stems from 'oblique depictions' of American insecurity. Distrust in one's ability is the main reason for people to project the abject inside of them on an 'other' that is not deemed human. Examples of this exaggerated sense of insecurity are possibly the defeat in Vietnam, the 1970s Arab oil embargo, the hostage crisis in Iran (although Iran is a non-Arab country), the US marine bombing in Beirut in 1983 and the TWA hijackings in 1985, all of which led to feelings of humiliation and impotence in the United States of America (Semmerling, 2006). The image of the American had to be redeemed, and finding an enemy became a necessity. The Middle East provided the perfect venue as its people's behaviors contradicted American ideologies and myths, and actions such as plane hijacking provided the Americans with the scapegoat that they needed (Semmerling, 2006).

Karen Engle (2009) suggests that facialization is a

historical practice of linking surface with depth ... [and it] operates as a method of identification whereby the face of a subject, which is believed to reveal an interior truth ... comes to stand for the narratives a nation tells about itself.

In Hollywood films, the Arab is inherently immoral and corrupt without any chance of redemption. This interior is projected onto the external façade; thus the Arab's image has to be ugly, dark, and repulsive. This is the emblem for all Arab people and nations. Arabs had to fit the trope of the terrorist, a threatening physical appearance, vindictive eyes, and exaggerated noses. The terrorists in *Delta Force* (Dir. Menahem Golan, 1986) and Salim Abu Aziz (Art Malik) in *True Lies* (Dir. James Cameron, 1994) are excellent examples. This stereotype redirects attention from a lack within the self to an external entity (Semmerling, 2006). Film provided the best site to address the fear of the Arab, the predominant stereotype being the fixed image of the terrorist. The abject within has been transferred onto the Arab, and represented as abhorrent. The visual media allows us to negotiate this fear, personified in the ugly Arab, take revenge on it, and then triumph over it. That other outside of us is the epitome of what is abject, an enemy of any rational civilized being, existing in primitive desert locales that no civilized being can inhabit. Moreover, this abject other enjoys killing people and is namely an over-sexed sheikh who pursues Western women lecherously, as in the example of Jamie Farr in the role of the sheikh in *Cannonball Run* (Dir. Hal Needham, 1981, 1984). According to Khatib (2006), this over-sexed and lustful sheikh has progressed to become the terrorist of today. This is the only position the real Arab is allowed to occupy.

This even holds true for cartoons. In the opening scene of the original Walt Disney animation, *Aladdin* (1992–3), a camel rider sings 'Oh I come from a land/ From a faraway place/ Where the caravan camels roam/ Where they cut off your ear/ If they don't like your face/ It's barbaric, but hey, it's home'. Although the script was later changed the word 'barbaric' was kept. This stereotypical presentation of the Arab prevails to this day: an image that has been engraved in the collective memory of moviegoers since childhood. Moreover, the influence of Hollywood extends beyond the US, impacting other nations' perception of the Arab. Shaheen (2009) asks us 'to pause and visualize the reel Arab' and what we see are black beards, dark sunglasses, headdresses and 'usually threateningly exotic or dark-looking' people (Shaheen, 2008). In this context, the dark skin tone is disturbing. Not only does it function as the opposite of white but it is also used to represent

the impure. A Manichean dialectic is at play; white signifies the norm/the rational/ the pious, which is pitted against black, the abnormal/irrational/evil.

After the tragic events of 9/11, images of the terrorist began to emerge. Phobia, which was had been emerging through film since the 1970s, was realized in September 2001 and consolidated through the endless and hideous images that filled the television screens. What these images shared was the grotesque; the unifying feature lies in the abject portrayals of them, endless images of abhorrent and disturbing individuals.² These abject images have come to reflect the gruesomeness of the act itself. Khatib (2006) argues that the notion of Arab has become synonymous with 'Islamic fundamentalism in contemporary Western culture, from movies to news to social theory' and that 'Islamic fundamentalists have been reduced to terrorists, and therefore dehumanized'. Furthermore, the ghastly images of the dehumanized terrorists did not come as a surprise; it was what we were expecting. In his study of the Nazi camps, Giorgio Agamben (2002) tells us that the inmates were never referred to as people by the guards, instead they were labeled, cretins, camels, donkeys, or, interestingly, Muselmänn (German for Muslim); they became the site for experiments, entities that occupy the space between the human and the non-human. This process of dehumanization allows for various forms of mistreatment. Torture such as we had seen in Abu Ghraib and in Guantanamo is made possible by this process of dehumanization.

According to Erving Goffman (1974), we use frames in order to 'locate, perceive, identify, and label' occurrences surrounding us. Moreover, 'the very significant assumption is generally made that all events – without exception – can be contained and managed within the conventional system of beliefs' (Goffman, 1974: 30). Stereotyping people is a form of framing – hence, the image of the terrorist had to fit in the previously assigned frame. If an individual conforms to the stereotype, the stereotype is reinforced. When the terrorists' images started circulating on TV screens, the lessons absorbed by people as children about the 'Arab = Muslim = Godless Enemy' were consolidated, as reel images were now viewed 'against a montage of real-life images' (Shaheen, 2008).

Two films, which were produced *prior to* 9/11, uncannily have plots that mirror actual events that have come after them. The opening scenes of *The Siege* (Dir. Edward Zwick 1998), show a bearded Saudi Sheikh, a terrorist suspect, in the back of his Mercedes car, as it maneuvers its way through the desert towards a village. At the entrance of the village, the car is welcomed by goats; the driver is then killed and the suspected terrorist is abducted by American intelligence forces. The terrorist's name is Ahmed bin Talal, a family name resonating with that of a real Saudi prince. The beard and the attire mirror those of the late Osama bin Laden, whose Al-Qaeda group had already been linked to terrorist attacks around the world. The tagline of the film states 'Our freedom is history'. During the press conferences leading to the attack on Afghanistan, Bush told the American people: 'Tonight we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom' and the actual operation was called 'Enduring Freedom'. John Ashcroft described the September 11 attack as an 'assault on America and its freedom'. In a scene from an even earlier film, *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (Dir. Renny Harlin, 1996), an event similar to 9/11 is discussed. The parallels between the imagined events in such films, and the actual events that unfolded on and after September 11 raise questions about the potentially self-fulfilling role of such stereotypes.

When the terrorists were caught, the endless film footage depicted them exactly as we had expected, threatening eyes staring from an assortment of faces and head covers, or

vanquished and disgraced individuals who looked barely human. These noxious images of the terrorists, repeated ad nauseam, seem to affirm that this is the only Arab that exists. Thus, already familiar with images of unshaven beards, disheveled hair, bloodshot eyes, hooked noses, and strange turbans, we see them at Guantánamo in chains and defeated, stripped of their humanity and for many they are already guilty. The boundaries are now blurred. Are we witnessing what Jean Baudrillard (2004) would have described as a simulation of the real (Baudrillard, 2004)? The more images we see on our television screens of the terrorists resembling film images of the reel terrorist, the stronger the blurring.

On 12 March 2006, American soldier Steven Dale Green and three others stormed into the home of 14-year-old Abeer Al Janabi in a village near Yusufiyya in Iraq, shot her family and gang raped Abeer before killing her and setting her body on fire (Sengupta, 2010). In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Green said I went to Iraq to kill people (Sengupta, 2010). Green also adds: 'it's something I had been through a million times, in training for raiding houses. It was just eliminating targets' and according to him in Iraq 'killing people is like squashing an ant' (Sengupta, 2010). People in Iraq are abject others deserving of extermination. The war, undoubtedly, has had a negative impact on Green, but the actions mimic film scenes in which these Arabs are deserving of being killed. In *America Remembers*, a fictionalized documentary of 9/11, CNN anchor Paula Zahn states, 'We finally saw the faces of evil'; the terrorists' faces have conformed to the image of the reel Arab. The reel Arab steps out of the movie scene into real life; reel and real have become one.

Notes

1. I am borrowing the term reel from Jack Shaheen's (2009) book *Reel Bad Arabs*.
2. For examples of the photos of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed that were repeated endlessly on the TV screens refer to <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,258817,00.html> and <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/09/09/photographs-of-khalid-shaikh-mohammed-at-guantanamo-appear-online/>

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