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HOLLYWOOD MOVIES Terrorism 101

"Ce n'est plus celui qui a la plus grosse bombe qui l'emportera dans les conflits de demain, mais celui qui raconte la meilleure histoire."—Francis Pisani¹

When asked in 1998 "What is it that these terrorists want from the United States?" Richard Hass, head of the foreign policy department at the Brookings Institution replied: "Well, the answer is it's not anything we're simply doing. It is who we are. It's the fact that we're the most powerful country in the world. It's the fact that we're a secular country. [...] It is simply who we are and it is our existence that really bothers them."² This vision of terrorism against American interests is shared by many, and has become somehow the official position on terrorism. That same year, President William Clinton stated: "Americans are targets of terrorism, in part, because we act to advance peace and democracy and because we stand united against terrorism."³ And for Thomas Friedman, the famous columnist of the *New York Times*, terrorists "have no specific ideological program or demands. Rather, they are driven by a generalized hatred of the U.S., Israel and other supposed enemies of Islam."⁴ A former correspondent in the Middle East, Friedman's opinion about terrorism was valued by many, even before he would become famous for his role in the divulgence of the Peace Proposal by Saudi Arabia's crown prince, Abdullah bin Abdel-Aziz. Yet he too seemed to undervalue the importance of terrorism and its meanings. Those statements were made in a country that did not suffer from terrorism as much as France, Italy or Great Britain did. Then came what was described as the biggest terrorist attack in History: the September 11th events that struck the U.S. and the world, bringing a new dimension to terrorism. Suddenly the menace often described in movies became true; suddenly the collapsing buildings were not mock-ups.

1. "The one who will prevail in the future is no longer the one with the biggest bomb, but the one who tells the best story (or history)," Francis Pisani, "Penser la cyberguerre," *Le Monde diplomatique* (août 1999), 5.

2. NBC, "Today" show (August 22, 1998).

3. *The Washington Post* (August 9, 1998).

4. *The New York Times* (August 22, 1998), 15.

After the September 11, New York City, even more than the rest of the country, had to learn to live again, and launched a series of measures, including ads to help people recover, and show tourists life was going on. One of those commercials featured Actor-Director Woody Allen, explaining why he loved NYC so much. The same Allen later said, in a sentence that could sound witty, but was in fact very accurate “too bad the Terrorists of the 11th of September learned life in Hollywood movies...”

Terrorists are not the only ones: many people get to know the U.S. and the world through the eyes of Hollywood cameras. Umberto Eco once said that 70% of our knowledge comes from Hollywood. This percentage might sound a bit exaggerated, but still, a very important part of what people know all around the world originates in the commercial film industry, whose studios are mainly located in Southern California. Hollywood is the pre-eminent cinematography in the world, and has been so for almost a century, since the end of World War I. Unlike France, or to a lesser extent Great Britain and Italy, the Hollywood cinema, distinct from the rest of the American cinema, is proud to call itself an industry. This business is a very profitable one, entertainment being the second largest U.S. exportation, right after aeronautics. Yet there seem to be a second goal to Hollywood’s spreading, as the American poet Carl Sandburg once put it, giving a speech to an assembly of cinema executives in November 1961:

I meet people occasionally who think that motion pictures, the product that Hollywood makes, is merely entertainment, has nothing to do with education. That’s one of the darnest fool fallacies that is current. When I was a motion picture editor on the *Chicago Daily News* we used to report what was a four-handkerchief picture as distinguished from the two-handkerchief picture. Anything that brings you to tears by way of drama does something to the deepest roots of your personality. All movies good or bad are educational and Hollywood is the foremost educational institute on earth, an audience that runs into an estimated 800 million to a billion. What, Hollywood’s more important than Harvard? The answer is, not as clean as Harvard, but nevertheless, farther reaching.⁵

Hollywood’s influence is overwhelming, but the American government does not control the cinema industry, and some might say it is the other way around. Congressmen do consider R-rated films an issue when election times are coming, the way Joseph Lieberman and John McCain did in 2000. Both senators asked the Federal Trade Commission to inform on violence in cinema. The result is an impressive 330-page report entitled “Marketing Violent Entertainment to Children: A Review of Self-Regulation and Industry

5. Quoted in Reinhold Wagenleitner (translated by Diana M. Wolf), *Coca-colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill, NC.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 222.

Practices in the Motion Picture, Music Recording & Electronic Game Industries:"

We are not trying to tell the entertainment industry what to produce. We know it would be unconstitutional to regulate the content of their products. Nor are we trying to substitute our judgment for that of parents and put the government in the position of determining what is appropriate for children. We are simply saying that if a movie studio, record producer, or video gamemaker voluntarily labels something as unsuitable for children, then they should not market those products directly to children. That's not censorship. That's common sense.⁶

As an answer, Jack Valenti, the mighty head of Hollywood's lobby, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), has been holding the same position since he started his job in 1966:

"I have no problem with the White House taking a stand," said Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Assn. of America. "I hope they'd say we are one of the most important exports and are protected by the 1st Amendment."⁷

Violence is a key issue in the Hollywood industry. Although it is opposed by many associations in the United States, violence sells and attracts audiences to Hollywood movies. Between 1968 and 1990, the *Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA)*⁸ rated 10,000 films, and classified half of them as R. In 2002, out of the 132 films which earned more than 200 million dollars worldwide, 49 were rated R, 23 PG, 49 PG-13 against 11 G. R and PG ratings might sometimes be due to sexual content, but in the majority of cases, the film is just too violent for young adolescents. Senators McCain and Lieberman are fighting a certain type of violence, one that is socially unacceptable, as in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) or *Natural Born Killers* (1994). Yet, several other kinds of violence exist that should also be watched carefully.

Credulity is the entertainment industry's most dangerous product, and the violence it promotes isn't destructive to people but to their sense of reality, their ability to perceive the world they live in. If the political establishment worries that boys and girls will see *Natural Born Killers* and be inspired to go on a thrill-

6. Joe Lieberman, Herb Kohl, Steve Israel, Tom, Osborne, "Legislators' Letter to Bush on Media Accountability," *The Los Angeles Times* (June 21, 2001).

7. Garvey Megan, "Washington Again Taking on Hollywood," *The Los Angeles Times* (June 21, 2001).

8. The ratings system was installed in 1968 and given in custody to the *Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA)* with the following guidance:

NR (not rated) or U means the movie was released prior to 1968

G (General Audience) means the movie can be seen by everybody

G (Parental Guidance; M in the beginning of the ratings system) indicates a film for adults and adolescents. In 1984, when *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* was released, PG-13 was added to forbid entrance to children under 13.

R (Restricted Entry) films are for adults or adolescents seventeen years old and beyond.

kill spree, that's because it views all expression as simply propaganda— a way to make people believe in a given set of ideological cliches and inspirational banalities. When the members of Senator McCain's committee were casting about for the kind of movies Hollywood ought to be making, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Schindler's List*, and *The Patriot* invariably seemed to come up: morally instructive fare that promotes maximum unquestioning viewer identification. In other words, a positive, edifying kind of violence— patriotic gore.⁹

Two types of violence coexist in Hollywood, one considered positive by society, and one perceived as negative. In the movie *The Patriot* (2000),¹⁰ the British are shown as brutal and violent troops, whereas the Americans are depicted as good and ordinary people who struggled for freedom. No one complained about this description, except the British who felt they were treated like Nazis. Hence, the jubilation of audiences when the savage Green Dragon commander Colonel Tavington is murdered by the heroic farmer-turned-soldier-for-the-love-of-freedom Mel Gibson. In the same way, when terrorists are killed in a movie, the audience cheers, although blood and guts have been spilled all over the screen. If hostages are murdered, no one applauds: the lives of innocents are wasted. Violence is acceptable, as long as it is directed against forces of evil, as they are defined in Hollywood movies.

Hollywood has its own world and the American way of life shown in the movies only exists in films. Some people do not perceive the difference, and often believe what they see in movies to be America's reality. Films do influence people in a number of ways. For some, it is a dream of a better life that pushes them to try and immigrate to the land of opportunities. For others, Hollywood is a new Babylon, a violent place of depravation that must be annihilated. This state of mind does not apply to Islamic terrorists only. When *Last Temptation of Christ* by Martin Scorsese was shown, some theaters were burnt or bombed, as in the French town Besançon in 1988. In its movies, Hollywood addresses important social and political issues that permanently impact audiences and can easily be reduced to mere entertainment. The truth is more complex, but few people watch Hollywood movies while keeping their distance.

We can assume the terrorists of September 11 all knew what Hollywood cinema was, thanks to satellite dishes, VCRs and the spreading of illegal copies of films. Except for two Egyptians, the terrorists of September 11 all came from Saudi Arabia, which, unlike its image of cultural isolation, is a

9. Howard Hampton, "Blood and Gore Wars," *Film Comment Magazine* (November 2000).

10. It is interesting to note that this movie was directed by German immigrant Roland Emmerich, who expressed his desire for patriotic tales after his life in Germany where, after the Nazi era, patriotism is considered nationalism and prohibited to a certain extent.

greatly receptive to American movies. Many channels can be received in the Kingdom through a satellite dish. Among them, the Showtime bouquet, which includes the Movie Channel 1 and 2, Super Movies, The Film Channel, The Disney Channel and several others that broadcast mainly American movies through the Saudi Orbit Network. It is perfectly possible to watch western movies in the Middle-East even if some are censored mostly due to moral criteria. Was Bin Laden's propaganda the only factor that pushed nineteen people to sacrifice themselves to try and destroy cultural symbols of "The Great Satan"? Terrorists probably saw in Hollywood's movies the same as any other audience in the world can watch: a cocktail of soft-core sex, violence and outrageous wealth. Different from its reality, America's image is the one of a country that is big, arrogant and bored. *Gladiator* (2000) has often been taken for a metaphor for the American Empire:

Rome here stands in for America: corrupt at its heart, based on enslavement, dedicated to sustaining pointless wars abroad while the mob happily forgoes a more civil society for bread and circuses. One of the film's better jokes is the way we're invited to see parallels between its gladiatorial arenas and the sports arenas of today, right down to the announcer/promoter (David Hemmings) who hypes up the combatants before the bouts [...] When Commodus' sister Lucilla (Connie Nielsen) tries to persuade Maximus to help her overthrow her brother, he complains, "I have the power only to amuse the mob." To which she replies, "That is power."¹¹

Thus Hollywood provides the world with an alternate America, using not only movies, but also books, newspapers, television, or Internet thanks to the massive mergers in the entertainment industry, creating behemoth like AOL-Time-Warner or Vivendi-Universal. Walt Disney for instance controls not only mass media, but also sport teams, cruise lines, theme parks and even a town in Florida called Celebration, where the happy few can live in a secure environment "the way it used to be in the good ol' days." Is Hollywood's world so unbearable that terrorist could kill because of it?

For William J. Palmer,¹² the origin of the terrorism film goes way back in 1983, with the hostages situation in Iran and the bombing of the Marines building in Beirut. Hollywood terrorism films show characters who rise up against the system, who do not play by the rules, but nothing is explained as to their political motivations if any. Indeed, Palmer quotes three movies as "narco terrorism's incursion upon the American dream" [Palmer 158]: *Scarface* (1983), *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984) and *Colors* (1988). Depending on the appreciation, these three films could as well be defined as gangster

11. In Leslie Felperin, "Gladiator," *Sight and Sound* (June 2000).

12. William J. Palmer, *The Films of the Eighties* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1993),

movies, their villains-heroes being closer to criminals than political activists. Talking about terrorism is talking about politics, for it implies defining where America's enemies are hiding, and where its friends stand. During World War II, the Hollywood industry shot several movies proclaiming the greatness of the Soviet ally, which was perceived as anti-American when the Cold war started. Hollywood does not want to make the same mistake twice. Politics is not fun, and can bring powerful enemies. Although the relations between the West Coast movie center and the East Coast political center remain unclear, it seems that Hollywood wants to stay away from politics, being part of the establishment and keen on serving the best interest of the country.

Therefore, after the end of the Cold war, when the former USSR and its allies were Hollywood's most credible villains, finding a decent enemy became a hard task in a time of political correctness. Among the world's population, the Irish long remained the reference for terrorism in Hollywood during the 1990s, with movies like *Patriot Games* (1992), *In the Name of the Father* (1993), *Blown Away* (1994) or *The Devil's Own* (1997). The I.R.A. and other terrorist organizations from Northern Ireland are appreciated as villains by American audiences: they do not attack the U.S., but threaten Great Britain, which is allowed in the former American colony of the Royal Crown. Many Hollywood movies target England as an enemy, such as *Braveheart* (1995), *Rob Roy* (1995), *Michael Collins* (1997) or *The Patriot* (2000). With 65 millions Irish Americans, the U.S. and the Irish peoples are quite close, and even if the I.R.A. can be seen as a terrorist organization, Hollywood appears more than supportive of its ideology. To Hollywood, the Irish struggle is fair; it is closer to resistance than terrorism. This standing on terrorism leads to one of the most important question: what is terrorism? According to the government site <http://www.terrorismanswers.com/>:

Terrorism is neither random, spontaneous, nor blind; it is a deliberate use of violence against civilians. [...] In another useful attempt to produce a definition, Paul Pillar, a former deputy chief of the CIA's Counterterrorist Center, argues that there are four key elements of terrorism:

It is premeditated—planned in advance, rather than an impulsive act of rage.
It is political—not criminal, like the violence that groups such as the mafia use to get money, but designed to change the existing political order.
It is aimed at civilians—not at military targets or combat-ready troops.
It is carried out by subnational groups—not by the army of a country.

As the terrorism expert Brian Jenkins bluntly put it in 1974, "Terrorism is theatre."

The trouble is that, according to this definition, few of the so-called terrorism movies of Hollywood feature real terrorists. Indeed it is a delicate task, as

screenwriters and studios have to juggle between the politically correct, American foreign policy, and the sensitivity of internal lobbies. Therefore, no government is explicitly named in Hollywood movies when it comes to terrorism. Organizations are invented, like the Crimson Jihad in *True Lies* (1994), whose leader Malik threatens the U.S. with several nuclear devices. He is nevertheless given the right to deliver a speech in the movie to prove he is no ordinary criminal:

You have killed our women and children, bombed our cities from afar like cowards, and dare to call us terrorists—but now the Oppressed have been given a mighty sword, to strike back at their enemies. Unless the U.S. pulls all military forces out of the Persian Gulf area, immediately and forever, Crimson Jihad will rain fire on one major U.S. city each week until these demands are met...

In the same way, *Air Force One* (1997) involves a group of terrorists from the former USSR taking control of the infamous presidential airplane. They demand that their leader, General Redek, captured by Russian forces and American commandos, be released or else the hostages will be executed. The American policy in this case is explained with the help of a dialogue between Rose, wife of the president, her daughter Alice and Korshunov, chief of the terrorists:

ROSE
Leave my daughter alone.

KORSHUNOV
Or you will do what, Mrs. Marshall?
(beat, he chuckles)
But I admire your courage. Your
husband, on the other hand...

ROSE
What do you know of my husband?

KORSHUNOV
I know he left you behind.

ROSE
My husband is a very courageous man.

KORSHUNOV
Your husband is a coward. He sends
soldiers half-way around the world
to steal a man from his home in the
middle of the night.

ALICE
You're one of Stravanavitch's men.

KORSHUNOV

So, you study world events, little one. That's good for a girl your age.

ALICE

Yeah, I study world events. Five thousand Turkmenistan Muslims were slaughtered in Stravanvitch's cleansings... along with 15 American school kids. You know how I studied that. I went to their funerals with my dad. I met their parents.

KORSHUNOV

Smart for your age, eh? Top of your class? Tell me, do you know what the word "propaganda" means?

ALICE

Yeah. Do you know what the word "asshole" means.

ROSE

Alice!

Korshunov kills one of the hostages without any trace of emotion. The president's wife tries to understand the terrorist's motivation:

ROSE

Do you have to be so brutal?

KORSHUNOV

Yes

ROSE

Why? Do you enjoy it?

KORSHUNOV

I neither enjoy nor dislike. I do what is necessary.

ROSE

How can you? I mean they're people.

KORSHUNOV

But they are not my people. You look at me as if I am a monster, but answer me this— when your planes bombed the oil fields of Iraq, did you cry

for those dark skinned men whose
names you do not know and who's faces
You will never see? Did you cry for
their wives and children. They were
people too, yes... but they were not
your people.

ROSE
That was war.

KORSHUNOV
So is this.
(beat)
Come now, you're upsetting the little
one.

Terrorism cannot be a solution, whatever motivations lead to it. Even if Korshunov had the best political and moral reasons to hold an entire plane captive, the audience would be against him. Korshunov is a perfect villain for Hollywood; like Malik in *True Lies*, he is brutal and does not feel any guilt when killing innocent people. His death at the end of the movie relieves the audience.

All of this is a little beside the point, as far as the storytellers were concerned. The important point was not to make it real, but to make it "believable to the American public," said screenwriter Andrew W. Marlowe.

"We're not trying to educate or inform here," he said. "We're trying to entertain. The choice we made was to keep everything as credible as possible [...] [but] we thought our first obligation was to the audience, who, when they paid their hard-earned money, deserved to be thrilled and excited."¹³

One of the key movies to understand the partnership between Hollywood and fantasy terrorism is certainly *Wag the Dog* (1997). After being caught in a scandalous sexual situation days before the election, the American President does not seem to have much of a chance of being re-elected. One of his advisors, Spinmeister Conrad Brean (Robert De Niro) contacts a top Hollywood producer Stanley Motts (Dustin Hoffman) in order to manufacture a war in Albania that the President can heroically end, all through mass media. The war does not exist; Brean and Motts create an illusion of it, explaining to the press why Albania wants to attack America, being jealous of the American way of life, as it is often officially explained in real life. The threat becomes real, even to the CIA, who start to investigate on the event of terrorists

13. Peter Baker, "The Plane Truth: Reality Can't Beat a Blockbuster," *The Washington Post* (July 25, 1997).

crossing the American borders with a case containing a nuclear device. Naturally, the journalists commenting on *Wag the Dog* are more than skeptical:

If the press is as disbelieving as Brean thinks, then it would also not believe in the “war” with Albania, including the easily disproved story of terrorists crossing the border. The disbelieving press would want to know where the instant videos of the war (which producer Motts has manufactured) come from, and so on.¹⁴

Not so sure. *The Peacemaker* (1998) tells a very similar story to *Wag the Dog*. The Bosnian war is going global and another nuclear device in a backpack is aiming at the United Nations building to blow up New York City. Most of the critics thought this plot was very believable, even if Stephen Hunter, from the highly renowned *Washington Post* called the Bosnian leader of the film a “Serbian Politician.”¹⁵ Hollywood audiences are not too familiar with the former Communist countries, and it is important to explain their situation in relation to the United States. The Balkans are too far away, and people in this area are Caucasian, hence it is hard to recognize the villains from the good guys. Looking on the map, the perfect enemy would be from Asia, but Japan is an important economic partner of the United States, and so has become China. Another possible foe for the post-Cold War world is the Middle East, with its numerous countries trying to destroy Israel, its easily identified people and its well-known passion for violence. Hollywood tried to show Arabs as bad guys, but mildly succeed. The Arab countries did not look very threatening, especially after the Gulf War, and the American audience is confident the CIA or the NSA is carefully scrutinizing the Middle East. In the 1990s, Hollywood’s most successful terrorist movies, the *Die Hard* trilogy showed German bandits motivated by money, but with no political agenda to express. Starring Bruce Willis as savior from NYPD John McClane, the first episode, *Die Hard* (1988), involved a group of villains who formerly belonged to the West German Volksfrei Movement. Keeping hostages from a major Japanese company that set foot in the U.S., Hans Gruber, head of the bandits, expounds his reasons for attacking Nakatomi:

Hans: Ladies and gentlemen, due to the Nakatomi Corporation’s legacy of greed around the globe, it is about to be taught a lesson on real power. You will be witnesses. If our demands are not met, however, you may become participants instead.

Nakatomi is a very rich company and the terrorists want the 640 millions dollars from its vault. The audience does not feel any compassion for the

14. David Denby, “Apocalypse, Nu?” *New York Magazine* (December 26, 1997).

15. Stephen Hunter, “The Peacemaker: Right on Target,” *The Washington Post* (September 26, 1997).

Japanese giant, at a time when the impression was that Japan was arrogantly buying America by pieces. Takagi, CEO of Nakatomi, suddenly questions Gruber's motivations:

Takagi: You want... money? What kind of terrorists are you?
Hans: Who said we were terrorists?

Once again, *Die Hard* involves criminals, not terrorists. Yet, they are shown as terrorists to mock the political speeches of radicals who pretend to destroy Western societies while secretly acting for money. In *Die Hard 2: Die Harder* (1990), Bruce Willis struggles against Colombian narco-terrorists, and in *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (1995), he has to fight the devilish mind of Gruber's brother, who tries to rob NYC's main banks. The three films have had a huge worldwide success at the box-office, but the terrorists featured look more like the usual villains in Hollywood, not like politically-driven terrorists. Furthermore, Hollywood is trying hard not to link the *Die Hard* trilogy and the actual terrorist events that took place in the U.S., especially after *Die Hard with a Vengeance*:

The only consolation is that the wild storyline obscures whatever uncomfortable parallels may have existed between the threat of terrorism in the movie and the recent Oklahoma City bombing.¹⁶

Footnote: A movie based on urban bombings creates unavoidable reminders of the Oklahoma City tragedy. During press interviews about "Die Hard with a Vengeance," Willis requested that he not be asked about Oklahoma City because he didn't want to trivialize that tragedy by discussing it in terms of this movie. That seems to me like a sane response.¹⁷

After the bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City, fears were raised that the biggest American threat could be American. In the blockbuster *The Rock* (1996), Brigadier General Francis X. Hummel asks the Government for 100 million dollars, or else he will fire chemical weapons on San Francisco. Only the combined skills of a former British secret agent and an FBI biochemist will prevent the mad general from doing so. *Arlington Road* (1999), a less successful movie, expresses one of America's suburbs' biggest fears. Michael Faraday, a "terrorism professor" discovers that his new neighbors, the friendly Langs, are planning to bomb a federal building, and make him appear responsible for their terrorist act. Once again, no political reasons are given to an unbelievable act. What can possibly motivate Americans to try and destroy their country? *Arlington Road* lets the audience find answers for itself, when *Fight Club* has plenty of explanations for American terrorism.

16. Brian Lowry, "Die Hard With a Vengeance," *Variety* (May 18, 1995).

17. Roger Ebert, "Die Hard With a Vengeance," *The Chicago Sun-Times* (May 19, 1995).

If watched sufficiently mindlessly, [Fight Club] might be mistaken for a dangerous endorsement of totalitarian tactics and super-violent nihilism in an all-out assault on society.¹⁸

What is the Fight Club? First rule, you do not talk about it, so it is quite helpful. David Fincher shot a film about it in 1999. The narrator of the film meets Tyler Durden in a plane, and both of them start to think about the consumerism-driven society, and how they should make it change. The first step is the creation of the fight club, a place where men only punch each other to feel alive. The second step consists in direct aggressions against symbols of the commercial society, which leads to step three, the bombing of the headquarters of the main banks of the country. The film concludes with the buildings collapsing, in a new dawn where human anarchy would replace the frenzy of commercial consumption. Yet, *Fight Club*, starring Edward Norton and sex-symbol Brad Pitt appears as a very homoerotic film. Terrorists look more glamorous than dreadful, as in *Glamorama* (1998), the novel Bret Easton Ellis wrote about top models terrorizing the world.

“Fight Club” is the most frankly and cheerfully fascist big-star movie since “Death Wish,” a celebration of violence in which the heroes write themselves a license to drink, smoke, screw and beat one another up. Sometimes, for variety, they beat up themselves. It’s macho porn—the sex movie Hollywood has been moving toward for years, in which eroticism between the sexes is replaced by all-guy locker-room fights.¹⁹

If young fine men are so bored with life that their only issue is to fight and blow stuff up, it is called self-destruction, which is the topic of *The Second Civil War* (1997), a made-for-TV movie directed by Joe Dante. With its all-star cast, *The Second Civil War* is an interesting story about a possible future for America. When it is announced that orphans from Pakistan are going to live in Idaho, the Governor of this state declares that the borders are closed to immigrants. The nation quickly divides between those who still consider America to be the land of opportunities, and shall be given “the poor, the oppressed,” and those who believe in isolationism. A Second Civil War starts, showing that America has no better enemy than itself.

The success of American terrorism movies comes from the idea that scary movies always do well at the box-office, as long as they are not too real. As one of *Variety*’s leading editorialists put it:

Audiences have come to enjoy cartoon-like terrorists; explosions and destruction are guaranteed entertainment. But the Sept. 11 tragedy was a shocking

18. Janet Maslin, “‘Fight Club’ Such a Very Long Way from Duvets to Danger,” *The New York Times* (October 15, 1999).

19. Roger Ebert, “Fight Club,” *Chicago Sun-Times* (October 15, 1999).

reminder: Terrorists aren't fun. Destruction isn't exciting to watch in real life. [...] It may seem odd to describe this as an Age of Innocence in films, but there was a kind of innocence in Hollywood's depiction of terrorism. Such villains could be suave (e.g., Alan Rickman in "Die Hard") or folksy and neighborly (Tim Robbins in "Arlington Road"), but mostly they were a slobbering and sadistic group who threatened mayhem, but would get blown away before any serious damage occurred, i.e., before any of the principal actors got killed.²⁰

"Next time we'll bring them both down," predicted a terrorist contemplating the Twin Towers in the film *Path to Paradise: the Untold Story of the World Trade Center Bombing* (1997). First shown on the American pay-channel Home Box Office (HBO) on June 14, 1997, this movie is now a best-rental in video-clubs. The movie suggested that the FBI knew about the attempt to destroy the World Trade Center, but was reluctant to pay an insider 500 dollars a week to get more information. Ultimately, the FBI had to pay him 1 million dollars and put him on the witness protection program so that he would testify against his former colleagues. After September 2001, American audiences are unearthing some movies that were not very much talked about at the time of their release, probably because they were too realistic. By watching them again, they start to understand that there might be a correlation between America's broadcast of itself, and the global image people get from this cultural transmission. Hollywood might very well just have given terrorists the keys to Fortress America: if it is on the news, it is real, and it strikes people more than political speeches.

In *The Siege* (1998), the FBI has to work against the "spooks" from the CIA, who have trained a number of Islamic terrorists during the Cold War, and must now face them. After the abduction by the U.S. military of a Muslim leader, New York City becomes the target of escalating terrorist attacks. First, the extremists take the passengers of a bus in NYC, and release them after the explosion of a paint-bomb as a warning. The threat becomes deadly serious when a theater is bombed, causing major damage in Manhattan and killing many innocents. The following target is a federal building belonging to the FBI. Since the civilians are armless, the army takes over the job of protecting the citizens of America, and arrests every young man that could be suspected of being part of the terrorist organization. Tanks are patrolling the streets of New York City, and the army puts young Arabs in concentration camps, the way Japanese were interned during World War II.

"What if they were black people? What if they were Italian?" These words are spoken by an unseen character in "The Siege," but they get at the heart of the film, which is about a roundup of Arab-Americans after terrorist bombs strike

20. Timothy M. Gray, "H'wood's age of innocence is over," *Variety* (September 12, 2001).

New York City. OK, what if they were black or Italian? What if the movie was a fantasy about the Army running rampant over the civil liberties of American Irish, Poles, Koreans? Wouldn't that be the same thing as rounding up the Arab-Americans?

Not really, because the same feelings are not at stake. Of all our ethnic groups, only Arabs come from nations that are currently in a state of indefinitely suspended war with the United States. The vast majority of Arab-Americans are patriotic citizens who are happy to plunge into the melting pot with the rest of us (a point the movie does make), but a minority have been much in the news, especially after the World Trade Center bombing in New York City. Many Americans do not draw those distinctions and could not check off on a list those Arab countries we consider hostile, neutral or friendly. There is a tendency to lump together "towelheads" (a term used in the movie). Arab-Americans feel vulnerable right now to the kinds of things that happen in this movie, and that's why it's not the same thing as targeting other ethnic groups.

[...] In its clumsy way, it throws in comments now and then to show it knows the difference between Arab terrorists and American citizens. But the prejudicial attitudes embodied in the film are insidious, like the anti-Semitism that infected fiction and journalism in the 1930s—not just in Germany, but in Britain and America.

[...] True, at the present moment most of America's enemies in the world are Arab. But at one time or another, this country has been at war with the home nations of most of the major ethnic groups in America. And it was "we" who were at war—all of us. Japanese-Americans who fought in U.S. uniform in World War II (or were in U.S. internment camps) will not have to have the buried message of "The Siege" explained to them.²¹

In 1998, when *The Siege* was released, it was not considered a political movie. It was presented as a "thriller" and looked just like an ordinary movie, with bad guys happening to be terrorists. Once again, no political motivations were explained in *The Siege*. "You Americans believe that money is power [...] belief is power" says one of the Arabs, but it is not shown what belief is at stake. The terrorists are madmen, enemies of American freedom, and the only way to deal with them is to destroy them.

I don't think *Siege* is a racist film, but like most American movies, it does create a handy Other in order to define an Us. The only difference is that this time the nigger isn't black.²²

This critic was written at the time the movie was released, when the plot did not sound believable. Now, as of September 24, 2001 one-third of New Yorkers favored internment camps for "individuals who authorities identify as being sympathetic to terrorist causes," according to the magazine *Newsday*.

21. Roger Ebert, "The Siege," *Chicago Sun-Times* (November 6, 1998).

22. Gary Dauphin, "The Siege," *Village Voice* (November 10-16, 1998).

Watching *The Siege* before and after September 11 is a very different experience. For instance, the headlines of TV news in the movie sound now incredibly prophetic, as if they came straight out of CNN after the “real” bombing:

“The worst terrorist bombing in America since Oklahoma City.”
 “Make no mistake—we will hunt down the enemy, we will find the enemy, and we will kill the enemy.”
 “You can’t fight a war against an enemy you can’t see.”
 “This is a time of war. The fact that it’s inside our borders means it’s a new kind of war.”

All those lines are abstracts from the film, and the feeling is that reality got its inspiration from art. The attacks on NYC were present in Hollywood movies, and so was the response. Another movie that did not really appeal to audiences, *Rules of Engagement* (2000), was an explanation of America’s foreign policy, the one obviously “criticized” by terrorists. In *Rules of Engagement*, Colonel Terry Childers is a highly—decorated officer of the Marines Corps sent to Yemen to evacuate the American embassy threatened by riots. He orders his troops to fire at the crowd, killing 83 persons, children and women alike. He is tried in a military court, and finally set free. His orders were right, and we can see as in a nightmare, a little girl taking a machine-gun from under her skirt and firing at the Americans. An armed innocent is no more an innocent, which explains the tough American policy on Third World countries representing a danger for the U.S. Yet, as the critic Roger Ebert puts it, “the filmmakers never clearly defined exactly what they believed about the issues they raised.”²³ This might be one of Hollywood’s main problems. The industry does not measure its incredible power around the world, trying hard to make more money.

At an Oct. 10 hearing on public diplomacy— i.e., propaganda – [Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), chair of the House International Relations Committee] said the “poisonous image” of America abroad must be corrected, and that it’s time Washington appealed to those in the private sector who know all about image-making and advertising. “How has this state of affairs come about? How is that the country that invented Hollywood and Madison Avenue has such trouble promoting a positive image of itself overseas? Clearly, this situation has not emerged suddenly or without warning,” Hyde said.²⁴

Swordfish (2001) had been shot long before the destruction the Twin Towers and was released on the 8th of June 2001 in the U.S.²⁵ John Travolta

23. Roger Ebert, “Rules of Engagement,” *Chicago Sun-Times* (April 7, 2000).

24. Pamela McClintock, “Inside Move: Rep. Hyde seeks H’w’d input MPAAasked to speak at Nov. 14 hearing,” *Variety* (November 4, 2001).

25. *Swordfish* was released on the 12th of September in France, the day after September 11.

plays Gabriel Shear, head of a very special team who operates the way terrorist organizations supposedly do. Their methods are to strike back at terrorism directed against the United States with a brutality so fearsome that terrorism will soon cease to exist. Stealing money from banks and using the highest technology and the best-trained mercs, their goal is to protect "American freedoms." To explain his curious work, Gabriel gives a speech to the hacker he hired to infiltrate banks, and who wonders who America could be at war with:

Anyone who impinges on American freedom. Terrorist states. Someone must bring their war to them. They bomb a church, we bomb 10. They hijack a plane, we take out an airport. They execute American tourists, we nuke an entire city. Our job is to make terrorism so horrific that it becomes unthinkable to attack American citizens.

No one knows to what extent such an agency could be real. Yet, Gabriel's methods appear to be very close to instructions given to psychological operators of the United States Army, and written in a 1979 handbook:

The United States is absolutely opposed to the use of terror or terror tactics. But the psychological operator can give a boomerang effect to enemy terror, making it reverberate against the practitioner, making him repugnant to his own people, and all others who see the results of his heinous savagery.²⁶

In the aftermath of the September 11th, the United States clearly understood it had become a nation just like any other. Even if it was not the first terrorist strike on American soil, not even the first time the World Trade Center was hit, suddenly, the massive destruction of two symbolic buildings sounded like a wake-up call for the Americans. After all, it was possible. The sanctuary could be attacked. After the tragedy, Hollywood was not quite sure which way it would choose for its next movies, even more brutality or a sensitive approach to world politics. Some openings were delayed, such as *Collateral Damage*, with Arnold Schwarzenegger, for its violent content. A story about a firefighter who is plunged into the world of international terrorism after he loses his wife and child in a bombing, *Collateral Damage* would have been a regular action movie before September 11. Yet, decency had to be shown by Hollywood after the tragedy and studio executives did not want to appear as if they wanted to make money out of pain. After a short while, it has been decided the show must go on. Jack Valenti, who represents the many interests of the Hollywood industry, declared that Americans did not want to be put in a prison of fear, and that life had to carry on. Hollywood decided to

26. *Psychological Operations Field Manual N° 33-1*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington DC (31 August 1979), I-10.

keep on making films the way it did. For there might be another job for Hollywood on the run. Hollywood remains a very important mass media throughout the world and, if its role has been seen as negative in the training of the terrorists, the industry must redeem itself.

The White House is asking Hollywood to rally 'round the flag in a style reminiscent of the early days of World War II. [...] In 1941 when war broke out, industry executives also were summoned to emergency meetings. Night shooting was summarily canceled and studio officials were warned to be on alert for "foreign agents" in their midst, with extra guards promptly stationed at studio gates.²⁷

And so, "after an anxious pause, the movie industry concluded that there is virtually nothing that people don't want to see on the big screen."²⁸ We can expect Hollywood to quickly forget about September 11, or use it in new scenarios. Will the audiences follow or ask for more responsible movies? Although it is a bit early to analyse the people's future choice, some facts are indicative as to its demands. The two biggest successes at the box-office in 2001 were *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's stone*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. Their success has to do with the fact that both are adapted from best-sellers and are by all standards well-done movies. But there is more to that, an idea that Good will always prevail on Evil. Forget the real world with faceless enemies: destroy the ring of Sauron or learn magic and the world will be peaceful again. The way it was before, once upon a time, long ago, in a galaxy not that far away...

27. Peter Bart, "H'wood Enlists in War Nets, Studios Answer Call to Arms in Fight Against Terrorism," *Variety* (October 17, 2001).

28. Kim Masters, "A Nasty Little Oscar War," *Esquire* (February 2002), 26.