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FROM 9/11 TO 7/7 AND BEYOND: FILM AND FEAR

Summary

From 9/11 to 7/7 and Beyond outlines the filmic representations of the terrorist attacks in New York, Madrid and London. The author divides the films into five possible categories (TV documentaries, conspiracy documentaries, TV docudramas, subliminal features, proper features) concentrating on the last one since it seems to be of the most limited scope. The text investigates some possible reasons behind this fact as well as provides general analyses of the films.

Over a decade after the terrorist attacks in New York, and the subsequent events in Madrid and London, appears to be long enough to sum up and explore the connection between this tragic communal experience and its filmic representation. It also makes one to ponder on how and to what extent these dramatic events have influenced and structured the collective mindset, what type of visual material they inspired, and whether this material may be analysed in the context of fear(s) it addresses and/or raises.

The following assumption may serve as a useful starting point: "Films transcode the discourses (the forms, figures, and representations) of social life into cinematic narratives. Rather than reflect reality external to the film medium, films execute a transfer from one discursive field to another. As a result, films themselves become part of that broader cultural system of representations that construct social reality. That construction occurs in part through the internalisation of representations."¹ This quotation comes from Michael Ryan's and Douglas Kellner's *Camera Politica. The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* which describes a link between film and social history. As the authors further observe: "Such representations are also taken from the culture and internalised, adopted as part of the self. When internalised, they mould the self in such

¹ M. Ryan, D. Kellner, *Camera Politica. The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 12.

a way that it becomes accommodated to the values inherent in those cultural representations.”²

If this is the case indeed, then an overview of the, as it were, filmic fallout from the terrorist attacks may reveal some interesting tendencies. Researching the topic I have come across such a wealth of material that any attempt to offer a comprehensive (and sensible) description of this phenomenon goes well beyond the scope of a few pages. However, the abundance of filmic productions demonstrated some striking patterns with one that particularly caught my interest. Namely, the way feature film directors approached the problem. What follows then offers a brief overview of the types of filmic narratives related directly to the terrorist attacks and concentrating on the depictions of these events in a form of feature films.

Everybody has their own story when it comes to remembering those events. And whatever the opinion about their importance it is hard to forget this moment, when the prevailing feeling was one of sheer shock and horror, combined with the weird sense of communal experience. It seemed as if everybody and everywhere knew that the rest of the world was watching the same images and listening to the same commentaries over and over again. If globalisation has any concrete meaning, then on that Tuesday in September we all went global. This act of going global had at least one aspect bordering on the perverse. This was the moment when both, the perpetrators and the victims of the attacks were strangely united in the act of watching the same images on television screens and separated by the interpretation of the meaning of what was happening. This pattern, when the terrorists and their victims were watching the same reports on television, was subsequently repeated after the attacks in Madrid and London.

Globalisation also manifested itself in the way these events engaged associations we all had. The media and our conversations alike were flooded with countless variants of the phrase: “like in a Hollywood film” or “I thought I was watching a disaster movie.” Suddenly everybody realised that even the most sophisticated action movie somehow paled in comparison with the “real thing.” However, at the back of our minds, we “evaluated” the horrifying images of two jets crashing into the towers from a cinematic point of view. Somewhere between the shocks most of us subconsciously, mechanically and unwillingly compared this imagery to the countless shots from Hollywood productions depicting similar cataclysmic events. And probably only then did we acknowledge to ourselves that the real disaster carries a completely different aesthetic value than its CGI equivalent although the towers went down as if everything had been carefully staged, planned and executed: the debris, the smoke, the zooming of TV cameras broadcasting the whole event live, the cries of disbelief, the running crowds.

Yes – we have seen this all before. Hollywood conditioned our perception, sensitivity and our imagination to such an extent that watching the Twin Towers collapse we could not but acknowledge some sort of familiarity with the horrifying images. Therefore it looks as if Ryan and Kellner were right: the representations

² Ryan, Kellner, *Camera Politica*, p. 13.

have been internalised and adopted as part of the self. Those images have already been a part of our collective psyche and we have lived with them at least since the 1970s, when Hollywood was in the craze of churning out one disaster movie after another. And if any of them particularly stood out in memory on that day, it was undoubtedly *The Towering Inferno* (Guillermin, 1974) telling a story of the tallest building in the world that caught fire during the opening party. Once the fire broke out, a series of predictable images followed: people in panic, cries of disbelief and horror, exploding windows, fire fighters rushing to help, dozens running down-stairs plus the sight of the building surrounded in the plume of smoke and fire.

Perhaps not surprisingly the rhetoric of post-9/11 programmes, documentaries, docudramas and features bore some striking resemblance to the Hollywood manner of presentation. It is not an accusation. Maybe events like these simply cannot be reported in any other way. If the disaster movies imagery and the reports from New York carried a specific aesthetic value (i.e. shot composition) they were charged with different emotions. Disaster movies were just... movies, whereas the terrorist attacks stimulated genuine fear and anxiety. And it is this fear that since then has become a permanent ingredient of the filmic narratives. But it acquired a specific tint. As Joanna Bourke argues in her study *Fear. A Cultural History*:

[I]mmediately after the attack of 11 September there was a renewal of “the American community” in response to danger: church attendance soared, prayer vigils sprang up at the corner of suburban enclaves and people rushed to embrace their loved ones. But at the same time as the words “I love you” seemed to echo around the world, an evil “Other” was being identified and preparations made to defeat it. [...] When frightened people stop fleeing from the feared object of the situation, they seek to fight, even if a scapegoat has to be invented. With the 9/11 attack there was a relief that – finally – the enemy could be defined as an “outsider”. [...] Although there was considerable unease with the adroit way these terrorists were able to assimilate into Middle America, the relief of their otherness was clear. The enemy could be identified: he was “the Muslim.”³

It is this combination of internalised representations and the identification of the source of fear and its translation into the filmic images and narratives what interests me here the most. Even a cursory look at the films inspired by the events unveils certain patterns enabling grouping of the films into five distinctive categories. Needless to say, the vast majority of productions tackle the 9/11 attacks with only a handful of films dealing with the bombings in Madrid⁴ and London. In fact, tracking down any significant production about Madrid proved to be quite a task. Therefore, taking into account the differences among the films boiling down not

³ J. Bourke, *Fear. A Cultural History* (London: Virago Press, 2005), p. 372.

⁴ The only known to me Spanish feature production *Ilusiones rotas 11-M (Broken Illusions 11M)*, Alex Quiroga, 2005) has a form of seven stories about different people somehow affected by the attacks in Madrid in March 2004. The tone of the film is melancholic and the stories aim at portraying different individuals affected by the mayhem. The issue of terrorism and culture clash are of secondary importance.

only to the volume of material, but also to their content, the following categories of films and programmes can be identified:

- TV documentaries;
- conspiracy documentaries;
- TV docudramas;
- subliminal features;
- proper features.

This division, like any other, can be further debated or questioned. Before concentrating on the last category I want to provide a brief overview of the first four. This should explain why the last category might be perceived as somehow unusual and hence worth investigating.

TV documentaries

Diverse in character and dealing predominantly with the 9/11 attacks, they have been coming up in two phases. Initially, hastily assembled almost a day after the attack, mainly presented the reconstruction of the events packed with interviews with the survivors and/or the experts. Later, this type of productions incorporated into their narrative lengthy technical and political analyses of all the aspects of the dramatic events. Various experts were questioned as well as some family members of those who lost their lives in course of the attacks.

Commemorating the events in 2011 a new batch of documentaries was released. Significantly, they contained a lot of footage of much more sensitive nature like the sight of people jumping off the windows of the Twin Towers. Now the viewers were able to watch those horrific jumps to oblivion on film, a sight they were denied a decade earlier. A lot of programmes and films were often devoid of any commentary, or voiceover, deciding to tell their story through plain images. This strategy in itself would be worthy of a separate investigation into its causes and motivations.

Conspiracy documentaries

these have been made by various individuals contributing to the theories claiming that the 9/11 attacks were staged by the American authorities since the vast majority of them deals with the New York attacks. Significantly, only a handful of such films and claims have been made with the reference to the bombings in London and I have not come across any such a production on Madrid. Conspiracy documentaries have already inspired countless books commenting on the phenomenon. Generally speaking, the makers behind those productions concluded that the attacks were self-inflicted by the Federal government and that everything had been cynically (pre-)arranged and executed giving the Bush administration an excuse to limit citizens' rights and, consequently, invade Afghanistan and Iraq.⁵

⁵ Probably the best known conspiracy documentary of all is Dylan Avery's *Loose Change*. The film has been updated a number of times and the title of its latest version, *Loose*

TV docudramas

the focus here is on reconstructing individual stories linked to the events. Again, there is a multitude of such productions. Usually employing the cast of unknowns, TV networks have capitalised on the incoming information from the investigations and went for a recreation of tragic stories behind the happenings. As above, it concerns only the New York attacks.

Subliminal features

I labelled this category this way to indicate a certain aspect of the narratives grouped here where the impact of the tragic events may be traced only indirectly and manifests itself especially in horrors and action films. However, it has to be emphasized that one can easily misinterpret a given element of the narrative as having no reference to the real events. Two Steven Spielberg films may be quoted as good examples of this type of filmmaking: *War of the Worlds* (2005) and, especially, *Munich* (2006). Nevertheless, it is all very impressionistic since in a similar fashion it might be claimed that Hollywood predicted, or anticipated, the dramatic events of September 2001 in such productions as *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998), *Deep Impact* (Mimi Leder, 1998) or *Executive Decision* (Stuart Baird, 1996).

Proper features

there are only a handful of filmic productions directly dealing with the events. By “directly” I understand the depiction of the actual attacks. I can think of a number of general reasons behind this scarcity of visual artefacts. One: the sensitive nature of the material. The tragedy behind the events in the three cities with the damage and loss of life seemed to have been too overwhelming to enable the filmmakers to deal with the subject matter without consideration for the feelings of the audiences not to mention those (in)directly involved in the events. Two: a wide coverage of the events in all other types of productions listed above rendering any fictional account of the events as superfluous. Three: films on any of the attacks could hardly be presented as happy ending stories. Therefore, it is easy to see why the film industry has been reluctant to take up the challenge and invest money in a film that could hardly be classified as a box office hit. Four: plain boredom and tiredness. As cynical as it may sound, it has to be said that the attack received so much media coverage that adding another one seemed to have been totally unnecessary.

Still, it is this last category I want to concentrate on in the following section. I am interested in those feature productions that bear a direct relation to the attacks, the way they handle the image(s) of the perpetrators and the sensation

Change: An American Coup (2009), clearly summarises its agenda. A case in itself is Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) – a documentary with worldwide theatrical distribution, clever marketing strategy and the winner of the Palm d’Or at Cannes.

of fear they address. This last emotion permeates their narratives to various degrees. The typology of fear might be represented in a form of a rhombus having its four peaks marked with four types of fear: individual vs. collective and clinical vs. cultural. This differentiation does not imply in any way that given types of fears are mutually exclusive. The four terms refer only to some “definitive” aspects of fears, whereas everyday experience is certainly a mixture of emotions occupying the area spread somewhere among all of them.

Although some choices may be debatable, I have selected the following “proper” feature productions for further investigation:

New York:

11.09.01 (eleven various directors, 2002)

The Hamburg Cell (Antonia Bird, 2004)

United 93 (Paul Greengrass, 2006)

World Trade Center (Olivier Stone, 2006)

London:

Yasmin (Kenneth Glenaan, 2004)

Brick Lane (Saraqh Gavron, 2007)

London River (Rachid Bouchareb, 2009)

Four Lions (Christopher Morris, 2010)

The films listed above are diverse in the way they present the events with the most striking contrast between the depiction of New York and London attacks. The “New York stories” clearly adapt victims’ point of view, whereas the “London stories” tackle the issue from, predominantly, Muslim perspective. A case in itself is *Four Lions* approaching the problem of British “home grown terrorism” from comedy-drama angle.

The Hollywood productions that dramatise the 9/11 attacks in the most direct way are the films of Oliver Stone and Paul Greengrass. Stylistically and emotionally, the two movies are worlds apart. Olivier Stone employs a strategy of portraying the heroic and probably this is why *World Trade Center* turns into a typical, run-of-the-mill Hollywood flick – high on clichéd emotions and low on intellectual insight. Its declarative tone makes it virtually unwatchable. If the film’s message can be ignored as sheer, yet tiresome, propaganda, what is interesting in Stone’s depiction of the 9/11 events is a certain type of lack. The director creates the world with cataclysmic events strangely devoid of fear. There is panic, but there is no fear. This is not only odd, but it is false. It appears as if the obligatory heroism bathed in saccharine sentimentalism was enough to deal emotionally with the attacks. Schematic story and one-dimensional characters are clearly intended to uplift the common spirit and heal the wounds. But the film was made five years after the tragic events and intentionally limiting its message to a mere patriotic dramatisation seems to be quite pointless.

World Trade Center, beside the lack of true emotions, suffers from a certain form of exclusion: the perpetrators are nowhere to be seen. They do not exist. Stone can be partly excused – the terrorists remained unknown in the hours immediately following the attacks. Yes. But this act of denial implies, indirectly, an existence of an evil force which is “out there,” incomprehensible, invisible, and deceitful. However, the director chooses not to deal with this evil force, to ignore the fear it might evoke, to curtain genuine emotions.

Paul Greengrass's *United 93* is much more effective not only in its artistic approach, but also in terms of portraying the emotional turbulences affecting all the characters. Although the script is highly speculative, Greengrass's realistic presentation of the story makes it absolutely believable. Fear and tension permeate the action especially on board of the plane. These emotions are not one-sided but experienced by the hijackers and their victims alike. Fear is omnipresent. One of the strongest moments in the narrative comes when both, the passengers and the hijackers, start praying to God. The words of prayer in English and in Arabic mingle creating a virtual cacophony of desperate calls to Christian God and Muslim Allah respectively. The passengers pray to survive the hijacking, whereas the terrorists pray to fulfil their suicide mission successfully; true master stroke in revealing ironies of life.

The terrorists in *United 93* are presented with clear bias: their body language, their manner of speech, violent, and, at times, hysterical behaviour strengthen the viewers' identification with the passengers. It also helps to identify the hijackers as “Others” in terms of culture, faith, look and behaviour. The dividing line: victim/oppressor is clear cut contributing to the feeling of alienation of both sides of the conflict as well as creating a confrontational paradigm of the culture clash.

In *United 93* Paul Greengrass picks up where Antonia Bird left off in her HBO production *The Hamburg Cell*. The film revolves around the activities of the group of Muslim fundamentalists behind the 9/11 attack. Bird carefully reconstructs the plot that led up to the tragic events in New York. The overall story clearly addresses problems of alienation and religious fanaticism. It is a chilling account of manipulation demonstrating how religious zeal combined with ideological indoctrination causes devastating results. For a Western viewer the activities of the group of Muslims are synonymous with mindless fanaticism and destruction. The film creates a peculiar sense of ambiguity. On the one hand, the narrative does provide a rationale behind the actions of the terrorists leading up to the tragic events. On the other hand, the reasoning presented there appears to be so outlandish, that any attempt to understand and justify terrorists' behaviour seems to be futile and nonsensical. The Muslim activists are turned into “Others” who stand as the representatives of the collective fear of an alien civilisation and culture.

This clash of civilisations and cultures fuels collective fear originating in the confrontation of two visions of reality: medieval and modern and is clearly portrayed in both films by the visual contrast. According to Greengrass, “‘young men in religious rapture,’ are juxtaposed with shots of Manhattan skyline and the

densely packed urban environment.”⁶ What makes this contrast so dramatic is the certainty that these two visions of life cannot be reconciled and their relationship is based on mutual distrust and fear.

11.09.01 is somewhat unique in this category. Although the film was made as a direct response to the New York attacks, the effect of this collection comprising eleven short films is somewhat confusing. All segments are highly personal and connected to 9/11 in various, mostly metaphorical ways. However, none of the episodes tackle the issues in such a way as to pass on some kind of judgement or comment. The whole enterprise is more a record of the state of mind (of individual contributors) rather than an intellectual or emotional evaluation of the event.

In her book on fear Joanna Bourke observes that if “for Americans terrorism was the «new Vietnam» [then] in Britain «the Muslims» gradually replaced «the Irish» as the new terrorist threat of the century. In the West Islamic fundamentalism was equated with Nazism and communism.”⁷ Significantly, this shift is much more evident in British rather than American feature films. In these productions the tragic events from New York (*Yasmin*, *Brick Lane*) and London (*London River*) have a pivotal function in course of the narrative directly influencing protagonists’ fate and behaviour. All three films are multithreaded stories about women living (to various degrees) between cultures and the issues of racism, prejudice, and ethnic identity become topical once the terrorist attacks happen.

The outcome of the 9/11 attacks has twofold consequences in *Yasmin* and *Brick Lane*. Racial prejudice, covered by a thin layer of political correctness, immediately (re)surfaces once the attacks have been attributed to Muslim extremists. Thus *Yasmin*, finally realising she cannot claim membership to a social group she aspired, feels rejected and turns to her ethnic tradition. It is a victory and failure at the same time. Victory, because she finally comes to terms with her heritage definitely rejecting tight jeans in favour of the burqa. Failure, because, against her will, she is relegated to the position of “Other,” “the enemy within,” an alien tissue within the otherwise healthy social organism.

The 9/11 attacks generate an eruption of fear. The white majority looks with even more suspicion at Muslim migrants labelling them as potential terrorists.⁸ Muslims, in return, express their fear of being forced to go back to the land of their fathers. Social groups remain in the grip of collective fear generated, on the one hand, by the attacks and, on the other, by potential retaliation. *Yasmin* experiences

⁶ S. Prince, *Firestorm. American Film in the Age of Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 113.

⁷ Bourke, *Fear*, p. 365.

⁸ In 1977 and 1978 85–90% of the population of the USA and Britain regarded terrorism as a very serious problem. Indeed, in 1977 and 1978 for 55% of Americans and 71% of Britons the threat was sufficiently grave to advocate the introduction of the death penalty for the captures terrorists. In 1986 even the uncompromising state of economy, rising unemployment and poverty, escalating drug abuse, environmental pollution and the possibility of a new international conflict failed to topple terrorism from its lead in the fear polls. Terrorism remained the “number-one issue of concern” (Bourke, *Fear*, p. 365).

her individual fears of rejection by white majority and her ethnic group. Bengali minority members in *Brick Lane*, united by their faith, face open hostility and eventually gather in a community centre to counteract against the expected backlash. Collective and individual fears mingle. Everybody is afraid of everybody else.

This mood of anxiety and suspicion is further heightened in the aftermath of the 7/7 bombings. For the British the explosions on the London Underground and London buses transferred the source of fear from “out there” to the seemingly impossible “over here.” If 9/11 heightened awareness of a possible danger, 7/7 was like opening Pandora’s Box with all the suppressed collective fears and anxieties finding their outlet in the resulting crack down on Muslim extremists, officially sanctioned surveillance of ethnic minorities as well as open hostility towards individual citizens of Asian background.

London River directly addresses those emotions. Here, the London bombings serve as a kind of reinforcement of already existing prejudice generating further alienation. The narrative is from Elisabeth’s point of view – a middle-aged white English woman, who comes to London in search of her missing daughter. In the course of events she comes across Ousame – a black Muslim seeking his missing son. Elisabeth, contrary to Yasmin who eventually felt rejected by the white majority, suddenly feels alienated finding herself in places and among people whose existence so far have not concerned her. Elisabeth is genuinely overwhelmed at her discovery of a totally strange world of the ethnic minority and *London River* directly addresses these individual and cultural fears. The emblematic scene defining Elisabeth’s attitude towards Ousame comes when the woman is meeting the man for the first time. Her disbelief, shock, even repulsion can only be compared to her having an encounter with a ghost. Ousame, a tall, lanky black man with dreads arrives into Elisabeth’s world literally from the outer space. He is not like an alien, but he is an alien, the “Other,” causing fear and intimidation.

Although told from various perspectives, the filmic narratives tend to represent a white majority point of view identifying Muslims as a threatening factor. Even if those communities are not presented as posing a direct threat the possibility is there. *Yasmin* and *Brick Lane* contain sequences clearly exposing those fears. While the filmmakers try to balance such images with those of “descent Muslims” it cannot be denied that there is an atmosphere of ambiguity and suspicion. Particularly in *Yasmin* when Nasir, her brother, gets reprimanded by their father for expressing positive opinions on the 9/11 attacks but eventually he decides to travel to Pakistan and join his fellow compatriots in their fight against the American oppression. This gives the film a nearly prophetic feel: *Yasmin* was released in 2004 with the London bombings occurring just a year later. The perpetrators, as it was later discovered, were young British citizens of Pakistani background. With hindsight one may assume then it is not that unfair to feel threatened by one’s fellow citizens who are ready to resort to violence to pursue their goals.

Four Lions deals with exactly this problem. The story about fundamentalism, home grown terrorism, living between two cultures, the clash of medievalism and

modernity are all there. The filmmakers do not shy away from none of these issues, heightening the effect by coming up with the story which is very, very funny. And tragic. The plotting of a group of Muslim “moderate extremists” (as they call themselves) leaves no doubt who is to blame. The film can be read as a reaction to the 7/7 attacks but one which clearly points at the Muslim religious extremism as a source of violence and an obvious threat to, as it happens, everybody as well as a source of fear. A satirical approach to the problem might have meant to slightly play down the message which, nevertheless, comes in its full force.

To conclude, one may be surprised by, on the one hand, the scarcity of Hollywood feature productions directly addressing the attacks and, on the other, the realisation that only the films directed by non-American filmmakers do not avoid (whatever the form) confrontation with the Muslim fundamentalism. Oliver Stone chose to disregard this issue in his *World Trade Center*. Contrary to Paul Greengrass who does not turn a blind eye. But he is British. Why is it then, that Hollywood, and the film industry in general, have so far responded to 9/11 and the subsequent attacks in such a restrained way? Why the deluge of documentaries and docudramas and just a trickle of features? Is it because even the most horrific documentaries are, at the end of the day, just accounts of events unfolding beyond our control? They just happen out there. Whereas narratives, even based on actual events, have to be interiorised, intellectualised and informed with our own understanding. And thus they are prone to reflect our often internal fears that have to be confronted once the narrative is completed. Perhaps Hollywood just does not want to do it. Or, perhaps, fear is simply a box office poison and, as we all know, that the town of tinsel is not renowned for its willingness to drink hemlock.

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Od 9/11 do 7/7 i nie tylko: film i strach

Streszczenie

Niniejszy szkic koncentruje się na omówieniu filmowych reprezentacji zamachów terrorystycznych w Nowym Jorku, Madrycie i Londynie. Dzieła filmowe uszeregowano w pięciu kategoriach: dokument telewizyjny, dokument oparty na teorii spiskowej, dokument fabularyzowany, fabuła podprogowa oraz fabuła właściwa. Tekst, biorąc pod uwagę ograniczoną liczbę filmowych artefaktów przyporządkowanych do tej ostatniej kategorii, rozważa możliwe powody takiego stanu rzeczy oraz poddaje wymienione filmy ogólnej analizie.